

## **NATIONAL PLANNING FORUM: *inspiring planning***

**NOTE OF MEETING: MONDAY 17 MARCH 2008**

**Local Government House, Smith Square, London**

**27 members attended and there were 13 apologies for absence**

### **1. Welcome**

**Mark Southgate, Chair of the National Planning Forum and NPF Vice-Chair (Government and Agencies), Head of Planning and Environmental Impact**

**Environment Agency:** welcomed everyone to our spring meeting, particularly new members Pauline Nash, HSE and Luke Herbert RICS. The layout of Room 8.01 has been altered so we now have flexibility in arranging seating for example cabaret or boardroom style - he invited views.

### **2. Ecotowns**

A presentation on the concept and current state of play was given by **Henry Cleary, Communities and Local Government**. A copy of his ppt is at [www.natplanforum.gov.uk](http://www.natplanforum.gov.uk) with the Agenda and papers for this meeting.

Questions and comments were as follows (*responses in italics*):

➤ How would the chosen locations fit with strategic principles at regional as well as local level, particularly as the latest round of Regional Spatial Strategies has only just emerged from Examination in Public? *The development plan (at regional and local levels) would be a factor taken into account in the decision on locations. Best if an Ecotown came forward as an LDF option, but not all may be ready to handle this.*

➤ Was funding available to expedite reviews of RSS, as however good the proposals, there may be better options? *Proposals would be tested against alternatives as part of the Sustainability Appraisal. However, if work on a particular development plan framework could be expedited, this could be considered.*

➤ What are the "special circumstances" in which new town powers would be considered? What are the benefits of such an approach? *The Government's basic position is one of co-operation with local authorities, so if new town powers were used it would be with the support of the local authorities concerned. These powers could prove useful where a chosen location straddled local authority boundaries, or where there were major infrastructure issues. Alternatively it would be possible for the Homes and Communities Agency to have a role.*

➤ The emphasis is on a major role for the private sector; given the economic downturn are there risks with this approach? *There must be a risk; issues of housing affordability and regeneration would come into play.*

➤ How does the concept fit in with planning processes for example in relation to the Housing Green Paper proposed mini reviews of Regional Spatial Strategies? *An RSS review could be used to have a debate on the issues, but this would not be an immediate prospect for many regions.*

➤ What is the likely timing for an announcement? *Possibly at the beginning of April or from May onwards (not during the pre-local election period).*

➤ How would the testing process work? Would it involve looking at lots of options? Would it encompass different ways of accommodating growth or focus on different sites for the eco-town? Would it be a single Sustainability Appraisal (SA) of the whole list? *A basic principle of Sustainability Appraisal was to test alternatives. Some of the*

*proposals may already have been subject to an SA, in which case the work involved would not be duplicated but the results of the appraisal would be included in the Government's assessment for structured consultation.*

- What would be the level of endorsement from the Government? Would it extend to policy support? Yes
- What is Government bringing to the table? Would the Homes and Communities Agency be involved? *Government would consider Growth Area type support, for example revenue support for local authorities and possibly capital, depending upon what the private sector bought. It was highly likely that - as English Partnerships was involved at Northstowe - the Homes and Communities Agency would have a role.*
- The Ecotowns prospectus suggested that a private body might take the lead, but there were clearly constraints on this, for example the Leasehold Reform Act. *Some private sector interests and land-owners were interested in long term commitment. Some bids were joint local authority and private sector bids, combining the power of both, but most require more work before final decisions are made.*
- Full support for the concept, which was part of a portfolio of solutions. The announcement is awaited with anticipation. The UK had been recognised internationally for its planning work in the past, and this would continue for its work on Ecotowns. The NPF could help develop with cross-sectoral inputs.

The Chair thanked Henry for his lucid and informative presentation, and for responding to questions and comments.

### **3. Culture Change**

#### **(i) Summary Culture Change Report**

#### **(ii) Manifesto**

#### **(iii) Action Plan**

(i) The Chair asked for agreement to the revised Summary Report being published and publicised alongside the Research Report (copy of which is already on our website) before our next meeting. This was **agreed**.

(ii) The Chair asked for agreement to sign off the 5 key themes and actions in the Manifesto subject to refinement of wording by the Executive Board.

- Page 2: para 5 - 24 national planning organisations had now signed the Vancouver Declaration. The figure would be amended.
- Page 4: Action 3 should be revised along the lines: *"Improve corporate working practices to secure greater ownership and better outcomes in the town and country planning process"*
- Page 4: Action 4 insert *"understanding viabilities and"* before *"..development finance.."*

Members **agreed** the 5 Manifesto Actions subject to these amendments.

#### **Action: Executive Board and KP**

(iii) The Chair then asked for commitment to work in sector groups on the Culture Change Action Plan. A round of sector meetings would be arranged in late April/early

May to facilitate this. These meetings would home in on key actions for each sector, and test the robustness of commitments to action received to date. The output from these would inform the Action Plan to be considered at our June meeting. The Chair clarified that he saw this as a document with a series of actions that support the NPF Manifesto. This further work was **agreed. Action: KP**

**4. NPF Business Plan 2008-11:** the Secretary drew attention to changes to our Work Programme for 2008-09 made by the Executive Board since the draft was considered at the December meeting. The Work Programme now concentrated on our niche role

- finalising and delivering on our culture change work,
- work on stakeholder engagement in plan-making, and
- making a start on cross-sectoral aspects of delivery.

The Chair said that the programme was in line with the Executive Board intention to focus each year on: 1 piece of research, 1 developing action, and 1 advocacy issue.

A member pointed out that the programme was ambitious, and that stakeholder engagement should not necessarily be focussed on plan-making. With this amendment the Business Plan was **agreed.**

The Secretary added that the Chair and she would meet Louise Bennett and Ruth Marshall shortly to discuss support for the NPF from Communities and Local Government on the basis of this Business Plan.

#### **5. Draft Note of 10 December Meeting**

This was **agreed.** There were no matters arising.

#### **6. Possible items for future Forum Meetings:**

Suggestions were:

- 1AP – some strand of this make sense, others are proving problematic. It would be useful to have an explanation of the thinking behind this, and to have a strategic discussion. It could be sensible to widen the discussion to include related issues including the requirement for Design and Access Statements;
- the Heritage Bill would be examined by a Select Committee shortly – it would be useful to keep tabs on this at some stage in the autumn;
- the implications of Comprehensive Area Assessments – in which partner organisations are part of the assessment process – and Local Area Agreements which are due to be signed off in June;
- implications of changes in political representation on Councils for planning, in particular the move to single member wards;
- Local Member Review Bodies.

Other suggestions were invited. **Action: all**

*NB A presentation on Planning Aid, and debate on the forthcoming consultation on the Sub-National Review have been suggested to date.*

**7. AOB** – none were received

<b>NEXT FORUM MEETING - same time, same venue - MONDAY 16 JUNE</b>
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