

NATIONAL PLANNING FORUM: *inspiring planning*

Draft Note of Meeting: Thursday 21 June 2007

Local Government House, Smith Square, London

Attendance and apologies: there were 41 members present, and 11 apologies

1. WELCOME

Mark Southgate (MS), NPF Chair and Vice-Chair (Government and its Agencies), Head of Planning and Environmental Assessment, Environment Agency, welcomed members including those attending for the first time. Names of attendees and apologies received are kept on file.

2. PLANNING WHITE PAPER

The presentation given by **Ian Scotter (IS)**, **Cabinet Office** and **Paul Hudson (PH)**, **Communities & Local Government** is on the NPF web-site (<http://www.natplanforum.org.uk>)

Comments from business, 3rd sector and members [*speakers' responses in italics*]:

- the business sector considered that the MIPS proposals were pretty much on the right track, and expressed concern that any controversy they caused should not de-rail the town and country planning proposals. The latter appeared to be good in principle, but much would depend on the detail and the changes made to practice (not just process). There were still gaps in the White Paper, ie
 - clarity on/separation of central and local government roles;
 - acknowledgement of potentially disruptive local politics;
 - incentives for local government to encourage development;
 - local skills including mandatory training for councillors;
 - proposals to "tame" Judicial Review;
 - detail on streamlining community involvement; and
 - clarity on planning gain supplement (business favoured a tariff approach).
 - the coalition of 3rd sector organisations together represented over 2m people. While welcoming the aim of clearer National Policy Statements (NPS) and earlier dialogue with developers of major projects, they were not convinced that the MIPS proposals would deliver for the environment, suspecting that the proposals were simply a means of pushing through airport expansions and nuclear power stations. SEA and the Habitats Directive should apply to all NPS. The legitimacy of the Independent Planning Commission (IPC) was questionable; it should be advisory, have ecological expertise, guaranteed local discretion and a role in scrutiny of draft NPS. There was also a need for a sustainable development duty in legislation for MIPS.
- Re town and country planning (T&CP) aspects, the 3rd sector:
- had concerns about the evidence base for the Barker Reviews;
 - supported extending householder permitted development subject to environmental safeguards;
 - was concerned that the review of national planning policy should retain strong environmental policy;
 - considered there was a need to strengthen the draft Climate change PPS on biodiversity aspects; and
 - was concerned about the potential to undermine the plan-led system.
- procedures for DPD withdrawal/plan changes were too cumbersome and lengthy currently.
 - there was a need to take into account that many councillors are very experienced

- half the country had 2 tier local government; was there any intention to introduce an appeal to the county in 2 tier areas?
- there were reservations about the IPC, in particular whether it would contain any elected members and the process for selecting commissioners. The challenge for local government was to work together even if authorities were of different political persuasion.

PH replied that MIPS and the IPC would need primary legislation; T&CP elements required secondary legislation and could thus be introduced fairly quickly subject to responses to consultation. Changes to LDF procedures would bite more on the next round of work – it was important not to destabilise progress being made in the current round of LDF preparation; Government Offices (GOs) would advise as appropriate. He acknowledged that there needed to be updating for existing councillors, and proper support for new members. He added that the invitation to local authorities to put forward proposals for change could lead to a more complex pattern of local government in England; planning reforms would need to take this into account.

IS welcomed the positive comments about MIPS, emphasising that there was a strong theme of ensuring sustainable development (SD) and meeting the challenges of climate change (CC) and noting that the detail would need to reflect this. All NPS would need to integrate the requirements for SD, including opportunities for public involvement. IPC members would be appointed via a transparent selection process; local government expertise would be useful, but membership would not be representative.

- PGS shouldn't be discounted
- impressed by the safeguards on the IPC, the current situation on major infrastructure was disgraceful – we need a system to make these decisions more quickly
- the level missing from NPSs was their coordination and integration
- de-regulating planning fees would lead to chaos
- supported the conclusions on Householder Development Consents – too many planning staff spent too much time on these minor matters, including servicing committees. They should be released to work on Design Codes, master plans, pre-application advice to applicants, LDFs
- concern that there were too many planners tied up in development control and all the interesting work was going out to consultants.
- delighted to see the proposal for Planning Process Agreements in the White Paper as piloted by PAS; these had been championed by the NPF
- considered that it was important to review the Green Belt
- vital to ensure timely conclusion of S106s; agreement on these can take years.

PH replied that the aim is to release planning staff for more creative work in the longer term. Differential planning fees could reflect the costs of the service - a framework would need to be developed for this. He noted the debate about PGS and S106. Green Belt Review, if needed, was a task for local planning authorities provided for already in PPG2.

- a lot hung on due consideration being given to issues in NPS, for example nuclear power stations. Clarity, and opportunity for input, would be crucial. NPS should meet a test of soundness and, for example, “joined up” consideration of eg clean energy against biodiversity would be needed; they should not be rushed
- Planning Policy Statements were too bland to be useful at local level – they needed to be clearer to help local decision-making
- welcomed the White Paper's endorsement of the value of the planning system. However, much time had been spent time considering the Heritage White Paper (HWP) – it would have been useful to have seen the Planning White Paper before finalising comments on the former

- concern that CLG was not a signatory to the HWP - reassurance sought on this point.
- welcomed most of the proposals, in particular the general theme of moving from regulation to positive planning – this represented a big challenge; would like to have seen SPDs not being required to be listed in DPDs; supported permitted development for minor householder developments provided this didn't create more work without fee income, but strongly disagreed with the proposed member review panels; would like to see rapid progress on the proposals, subject to these comments.
- the Isle of Man member review panels did not work.
- as Janice Morphet's draft report [Item 3]: "expectations are too low - it all seems too difficult"; this underlined the need for culture change across the sectors
- clear need to grasp the ambition set out in the White Paper and position planning as a crucial part of place-shaping; in doing so need to ensure that we share best practice amongst stakeholders and secure better outcomes

PH said that it was important that PPSs should inform LDF preparation. He gave assurance that the Planning Directorate had input into the HWP, as is routine practice with policy documents from other Government Departments, but they are not necessarily listed in all of these. He agreed that culture change is about outcomes as well as process.

IS said preparing NPSs would be a challenge for Government Departments; they would need to be coherent. MS said NPF might consider potential principles for NPS. Action: Secretary

- the way the proposals were taken forward was important. Small builders were concerned with the process of applying for planning permission. The National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit had described planning as the "gatekeeper of land supply" – too often it was a drawbridge.
- changes to the GDPO, and the requirement for Design and Access Statements had made making planning applications more onerous for applicants and local authorities; validation rules could compound the difficulties.
- while welcoming the consultation, 41 questions made it a large task to respond
- PPS 4 was sorely needed
- the White Paper recognised subsidiarity, but local concerns needed to be reflected appropriately in decision-making on national infrastructure by the IPC
- recognition was needed of the value of the regional level in resolving conflicts; alignment of strategies - ie the outcome of the sub-national review – would be potentially powerful.
- there was a need to resolve national/local tensions.
- welcomed the increased status for World Heritage Sites (WHS) signalled in the Heritage White Paper, but caution needed on likely unintended consequences eg in the case of Bath, where blanket replacement of normal permitted development rights for unlisted properties in the WHS but not in Conservation Areas would lead to a massive increase in planning applications for the local planning authority

PH said that there is a commitment to look at information requirements for making planning applications and the GDPO; work would start this year but would take some time. IS pointed out that the benefits of national infrastructure are diffuse; it would be important to get the balance right – the aim is to move consultation into the policy stage. PH added that the NPS would need to link to RSS and to LDFs; some would focus on particular pieces of infrastructure, some would be more general.

MS thanked Paul and Ian for informative presentations, and all for a very useful discussion.

3. THE ROLE AND STATUS OF PLANNING

Professor Janice Morphet (JM) made a presentation (ppt copy on the NPF web-site at <http://www.natplanforum.org.uk>) on her Initial Draft Report commissioned by the NPF from IDOX plc, which had been circulated.

MS opened the discussion, pointing out that the current - and future - PM was interested in Planning, there were lots of interesting developments including the Planning White Paper, but many planners were negative. NPF's work was intended to improve understanding of the opportunities.

Comments from members were as follows (*JM responses in italics*)

- encouraged to hear that all places matter and that micro-management is important. We need to be aware of "who it is all for"; planners needed to interpret the community's vision. NIMBYs existed because there was no other way of getting involved currently – it would be madness to leave them out.
- need to acknowledge that the position varies widely across the country and reflected differing circumstances. Planning has suffered from a lack of ambition, leadership and confidence at political and officer level. Planners have been put in a regulatory box and taken out only when something needs to be stopped. There was a need to encourage member and officer "planning champions"
- ways need to be found to integrate policy and delivery via Council strategy
- commended the distinction in the draft between planning and planners
- planners should work with others on an equal footing, not seeking to control the process, against a set of agreed objectives, and needed to develop a more positive role for planning.
- welcomed the document, finding it a hugely stimulating read; the section about inspiring places was particularly good, however something was missing – the inspiration provided by Letchworth, Welwyn and the early New Towns was continuously referred to by people outside the UK as a formative influence even though we were ill-served by architectural practice which hasn't stood the test of time. There was a continuing challenge to create sustainable communities – we must recognise the need to develop some green field sites to do so – there was a long and honourable record of doing so.
- it was right to conclude that there's not enough join up between planning and risk management – planning should use this language more often. There was potential to link to, and be part of, the new Comprehensive Area Assessments in local authorities.
- enjoyed the report, considered it excellent. When he came into planning excitement was created by the creation of New Towns and Green Belt and the public sector was at the heart of this exciting work. It would be regrettable if micro-management was not done – simply because there was no direct funding for it from planning fees. Place making and character were important – indeed heritage was fundamental to adding value. It was vital to put inspiration back into planning!
- the report was intended to relate to a wide audience, so there was a need to think about its relevance to various sectors (eg private sector - the clients' take; public sector – how it would relate to members).
- more was needed on how the general public and planners view planning (too negatively)
- a lot was relevant to cities, but more was needed on inter-relationships between small and large places
- the comment on lack of awareness of the public sector was spot on – applicants and consultants have a limited view of the public sector
- senior level buy-in to the report would be vital

- recent contact with planners had demonstrated lack of responsiveness, lack of knowledge and poor advice, so agreed she with the analysis in the report - we need people in place who want to make the system work
- the report needed to acknowledge the existence of 2 tiers and the importance of the transport interface; traffic management, highways, town centre management were all hugely important in place shaping
- development control dealt with a very small proportion of the stock, but the target culture hasn't helped. Need to ensure that planners were more pro-active in their response.
- the draft was really interesting. Planning suffered from conflicting demands from members/targets and decades of indoctrination that the private sector has more importance; while process management is important there was a real squeeze on time for thinking about the broader issues; and there was a need to think though the implications of out-sourcing planning.
- welcome for the report, which had not been put together in this way before now. Thanked Janice, and Kay for her note of the further points the Steering Group had asked to be taken on board. The issue about the role of individuals in the planning community needed to be added. Place was fundamentally about a whole variety of assets, but also about social cohesion, which required better community involvement – we need to think more cleverly about how to ensure this.
- the Secretary's note referred to 5 key themes; we should add "communication". There was a big task involved in communicating what planning is, and what it could deliver.
- there would be a lot of work involved in moving from this initial draft report to a plan of action. An action plan would need more teeth, a plan owner, resources, accountability, and delivery mechanism(s). The document was welcome in itself, but with commitment it could mean a lot more.
- the NPF and its constituent organisations were key people. Members need to say what their own organisation is doing, and can do in addition, by when and by whom.

JM thanked members for their comments, noting that they were all very positive. Community involvement via the SCI is part of the duty of local authorities (LAs - underlined by changes to the CPA) so is very much part of the "changing mood". She was glad to note the welcome for a risk-based approach. She will fill the case study boxes with examples including those relating to resources – for example 2 upper quartile LAs had looked at their staff resources and processes and found that between 15 and 25% could be re-deployed, using the savings to fund essential new tasks. This illustrates the point that planners need to change the way they work.

MS thanked Janice and Tony Burton for their work to date. It was **agreed** that report would be finalised in the light of the comments of the Steering Group (in the covering report) and of Forum members (as per the above note). A final report, draft action plan and monitoring programme would be considered by the next (ie 17 October) Forum. **Action: Secretary**

4. REPORT FROM THE EXECUTIVE BOARD (EB) AND WORKING GROUPS:

An update on Climate Change: a note of the Sub-group's discussion on the planning/building regulations interface approved by the EB had been circulated with the agenda, and had been sent to Peter Ellis, Communities and Local Government.

5. DRAFT NOTE OF THE LAST MEETING (20 MARCH 2007) - was agreed as a correct record of proceedings and signed by the Chair.

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

(i) **Chair of NPF:** Mark Southgate left the room while the Secretary explained that at its last meeting the Executive Board had considered the chairmanship of the Board and NPF for the next year (from October 2007). Normally the position rotates in order amongst the Vice-Chairs, however there are benefits in the term of office being longer eg 2 years. Without establishing this as a precedent, the Board recommended that Mark continue as Chair for a further year. He was willing, and Paul Hudson had confirmed that there was no problem in his doing so. The Forum members present **agreed unanimously.**

(ii) **Proposed main items for future meetings:**

Wed 17 Oct: The Role and Status of Planning: final report, action plan, monitoring framework

Mon 10 Dec: Skills: presentation by Professor Peter Roberts, ASC

An item on Marine Spatial Planning would also be considered for a future meeting.

(iii) **BURA Regeneration Awards:** the Secretary pointed out that applications for these need to be made by 29 June. Leaflets with details were on the table by the door.

(iv) **PiL:** the Secretary added that copies of the April - June issue of **Planning in London** were available on the same table, and thanked Brian Waters - Chair of the London Planning and Development Forum - for making these available.

DIARY NOTE: FORUM MEETINGS IN 2007:

WEDNESDAY 17 OCTOBER

MONDAY 10 DECEMBER

- at 12.30 for 1.15pm in Room 8.01, Local Government House, Smith Square, London