

5 Verlands Close,  
Cardiff  
CF 5 2BQ  
27 March 2006

Barker Review Team  
HM Treasury  
Room 4/E1  
1 Horseguards' Road  
London SW1A 2HQ

Dear Ms Barker,

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to your review of how "...planning policy and procedures can better deliver economic growth and prosperity alongside other sustainable development goals"...

The opinions expressed in this letter are personal, and do not necessarily relate to the views of the National Planning Forum for England of which I am currently Secretary, nor those of my previous employer - the Welsh Assembly Government - I was Head of Planning Division until end October 2005. My views derive from experience as a professional planner in a development corporation, local government, civil service, and the voluntary sector.

Overall, I have seen no evidence that suggests that the planning system needs fundamental change to enable it to deliver sustainable economic development. In answer to the specific questions you have posed:

1. The new planning system in England is capable of being delivered, given time. However, outcomes cannot be predicted with absolute certainty because they depend on local circumstances, and judgements of materiality and weight. Support and resourcing for speedier, more focused and strategic plan-making are already being demonstrated - eg in Plymouth. The value of pre-application discussions is being shown via the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) pilot of Planning Delivery Agreements, and surveys of developers and local planning authorities, currently in progress, will give further information on the costs and benefits of these discussions.
2. There would be greater certainty for RSS and LDFs if there was more joined up, integrated, spatial thinking across UK Government Departments, resulting in clearer policy on imperatives such as the response to climate change, and provision of major infrastructure. Exemplars are provided by the Spatial Plans and Frameworks developed by the Devolved Administrations.
3. Concepts of sustainable development vary. However, planning decisions which do not appear to achieve the right balance between economic, social and environmental factors can be challenged by the applicant at appeal, or via the Courts.

4. Systems and practice in other countries may provide inspiration, but changes need to be considered carefully before being proposed for England because of the differing legal, administrative and cultural contexts.
5. My experience is that good developers (at all scales of operation and for all types of development) take advice from competent professional advisers and build the time needed to go through planning procedures, including the possibility of call-in, into their project plans. It would not be sensible to alter the planning system to deal with poor quality developers/developments.

Government has made clear that it requires greater transparency and effectiveness for all stakeholders, including businesses; the recent reforms were designed to achieve that. Early lessons are already being drawn from implementation of the new planning system – for example from the experience of the Planning Inspectorate, and from action research on emerging LDFs by Planning Officers' Society Enterprises. Support to local planning authorities (lpas) from the Planning Advisory Service, to community groups by Planning Aid, to businesses by lpas through pre-application discussions, and to local authority members by the Improvement and Development Agency, will all help improved understanding, better proposals, and higher quality decision-making.

6. see answer to Qu 2
7. The Audit Commission's recent report on The Planning System (February 2006) makes it clear that the "...emphasis on speed is having negative effects on the quality of services..." The number of applications appears to be levelling off after several years of high growth. Local authority planners should be congratulated for dealing with the increased workload as well as they have. However, as both quality and speed are important, their targets should be modified, for example by using the percentage of decisions for major applications issued by the target dates agreed by the applicant and lpa. The results of the planning process last for a long time. Excessive concentration on speed can lead to reduced quality, which is in no-one's best interests.
8. The direct cost of making a planning application typically represents a very small percentage of the total land and development costs.
9. Occupation costs are much more likely to relate to the market than the planning system because so much of the stock is already built.
10. see answer to Qu 9

11. This is difficult to judge, because innovation depends on a variety of factors outside the planning system.
12. Skills need to be developed and updated, not only in Ipas, but also within the economic development, property and wider community. Training and updating is needed in assessment and engagement techniques, this should be extended to staff involved in community strategies and economic development as well as those in planning. All staff involved in planning should participate in joint training events involving different professions, Ipas, business organisations, Regional Development Agencies etc, in order to gain a greater appreciation of the wider issues. Action learning should be encouraged, for example during roll-out of the first LDFs. Tailored development courses should also be a requirement for Members.
13. Time is the biggest barrier; opportunities need to be thought through to test opinions in SMEs as well as other sectors in the most effective ways, and learning from good practice encouraged. Clarity, conciseness and relevance are key. Duplication of consultation must be avoided if at all possible. Timely feedback should be given to all consultees; increasingly this can be done electronically via the web.
14. Planning obligations (S106) already provide such an incentive, especially following their recently widened application, and this will develop with increasing use. Greater involvement of communities in plan-making, which is difficult and requires substantial expertise and effort, should also help over time.
15. The planning system has the potential, alongside other regimes including taxation and VAT, to contribute to regeneration, renaissance and economic development. There are numerous examples of good practice across the country where planning and planners have contributed to improved environments (built and natural), leading directly or indirectly to the creation of jobs and improved prospects for existing residents and businesses. There are annual award schemes such as those organised by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and by the RTPI, but it seems to me that the achievements of planners and the planning system are not acknowledged or celebrated enough.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Kay Powell B.Sc., M.Sc., MRPTI, MIHT