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Your Ref:
Our Ref: PS/14
Date: 21/03/06

Dear Madam,

Re. Croydon Council's Response to the Call for Evidence on the Barker Review of Land Use Planning.

The Council has considered the terms of reference for the Barker Review of land use planning and those supporting questions issued on 24th January 2006. The following response is framed as a series of points under each question posed in the Call for Evidence.

1. Is the planning system sufficiently flexible and/or responsive to the right signals to deliver the right development in the right place, given the changing economic circumstances due to globalisation, demographic change, natural resource pressures and environmental change? If not, what policy measures might help deliver this flexibility?

- What is meant by 'the right signals'? The rate at which the Council at a local level can respond to changing economic circumstances is governed largely by guidance at a higher level. The advent of the new system which requires a more regular review of planning policy through the Local Development Framework, affords occasion to better deal with some matters (e.g. energy consumption) and provides for a more 'rapid' response should it be necessary.
- Perception of the 'right signals' is open to interpretation and differs according to local circumstance. Further, any response should not be solely to 'the right economic signals', as these may be contrary to other signals and overshadow the benefits of other undertakings e.g. restoring natural environments. Economic and social development are strongly dependant on the environment and any land use planning needs to focus on protection and judicious use of natural resources to maintain ecosystem processes, and move towards the achievement of sustainable development.
- What is meant by 'the right development'? The planning process should be integrating land use planning and policies for different matters and prevent development that is not in the public interest. It should be

proactive not reactive and seek to ensure that the allocation of land, as a scarce resource is done in a fair, consistent and controlled manner.

- This raises the question of whether there is conflict between the concepts of flexibility and certainty. Is flexibility actually important? The planning system, and indeed reforms to streamline the process appear to maintain a degree of flexibility in providing a discretionary framework to take into account local considerations. The facility to enable local interpretation of economic and community land use policies is essential, especially when dealing with different matters experienced in urban and rural environments and regional variations; so a high degree of flexibility is important and should be maintained to balance competing demands.

2. Do you have any views on the scope of plans at the different spatial levels in England which are now emerging following the introduction of the new system in 2004? Are there further improvements to the plan-making process at the different spatial levels in England, particularly regarding the need to encourage a positive/proactive approach to planning, which was a key theme of the new plan-making system? Does the current system strike the right balance between central direction and regional and local discretion?

- We hold the view that for the most part there is the right balance in planning terms between national, regional and local strategies, with clear roles and responsibilities for bodies at each level, and where it is appropriate to exercise discretion. However we note there is some lack of integration of strategic guidance at national and regional levels which creates problems at a local level.
- Our main difficulty is coordinating planning policy with other “Plans and Strategies” for Services and Infrastructure. Each provides different levels of detail and carries a different status. Better coordination is needed to clarify priorities.
- The streamlining approach to planning introduced through the LDF system and e-Government commitment is supported by the Council, and clearly establishes Council's commitments to community involvement.

3. Sustainable development is the core principle underpinning planning. Does the current system achieve the right balance between economic and other goals, such as the regeneration of areas and the promotion of social cohesion, improving the quality of design of buildings and urban environments, and the protection and enhancement of our natural and historic environment? Are some environmental, natural resource, or social considerations given too much or too little weight?

- Agreed. It is encouraging to see some, albeit slight, recognition in the review questions that there is a necessity to deliver the right balance between competing demands to achieve sustainable development.
- The key to delivering sustainable development is an holistic approach. Economic issues cannot be considered in isolation from the Government's other objectives for the planning system, principally provision of high quality liveable environments and sustainable communities. The fundamental bottom line cannot be ignored; if environmental quality is compromised then achievement of greater economic growth and social progress is significantly compromised and ultimately irrelevant.

- We believe there is a good general balance between economic factors and social and environmental considerations reflected in the current system. One example to illustrate this point is the attention to sustainable transport solutions: any reduction in travel time between home and work, helps the overall work/home balance and peoples' quality of life, as well as contributing to energy and environmental efficiency.
- Matters such as food risk must be given sufficient weight as planning policy should be seeking where possible to reduce, and not add to, the overall level of flood risk. The same follows for renewable energy matters.

4. What, if anything, could the English planning system learn from the planning and consent systems operated in other countries in order to respond to this new economic environment?

- Firstly, we perceive there is a somewhat negative bias in the actions the Barker review will undertake, and a general assumption in the Terms of Reference that all is not right with the current planning system which is in its infancy and yet to be fully tested.
- That the English system could learn from other countries to better respond to the new economic environment is debatable. Countries have different perspectives on sustainable development and different resource bases and matters of priority. Thus the extrapolation of experiences in other countries must be cautioned. A balance is needed between equity and efficiency. Norway and the Netherlands (who operates the NAMEA system) are often cited as countries which have high standards of living and high GDP, rigorous planning systems and lots of environmental priorities and constraints.
- Legislation which speeds up and simplifies the planning system and enables development must not be at the cost of environmental and social concerns.

5. What is the impact of planning on encouraging or impeding business investment? In this context, how would you assess the potential of recent reforms to the English planning system, which are now being implemented? Are they increasing the transparency of the system and providing greater certainty for businesses? What further reforms, if any, are desirable in order to improve the transparency and effectiveness of the system still further?

- It is reasonable to expect that an appropriate national, regional and local land planning framework is needed to enable planning permission to be obtained for the 'right types of development' and which provides a supporting context in which businesses can develop and gain the confidence to make long term investments, and in turn bolster the economy and the welfare of society.
- It is a bit premature to say precisely as to the effect of the present system as it has not been long in operation. Some reforms are still in transition.

6. Is the planning system sufficiently "joined-up" with other related aspects of government policy? In particular, are Regional Economic Strategies delivering a clear economic framework to help inform Regional Spatial Strategies? Is there sufficient interaction between RDAs and RSSs when preparing their respective regional strategies and if not how might greater interaction be encouraged?

- We would reiterate here comments made under Question 2. From a local authority perspective, efforts to coordinate legislation at a Central and Regional level appear to be lacking.

7. Planning applications for major projects will typically take a considerable time to work through all the necessary stages. Do you consider the system puts too much emphasis on speed or do you feel that is too slow? If there is an undue emphasis on speed, what are the negative consequences of this and how could they best be avoided? If the process is too slow, what could be done to overcome delays? In particular, what improvements might be made to the planning appeal system to improve its speed and efficiency?

- As to the correct emphasis, we concede there are problems regarding speed, however this reflects the importance and impact of major applications, and the often limited staffing resources and competing demands the Council must contend with. The most proactive solution to overcoming delays and perhaps avoiding appeals on dubious grounds is to properly address all issues and impacts before applying. As a Council, Croydon makes a concerted effort to provide sufficient pre-application advice to facilitate this process.

8. Is there evidence to suggest that the direct costs of making a planning application are deterring investment? Are there any unnecessary burdens/how might information requirements be streamlined to reduce the regulatory burden from the process of making an application?

- We are not aware of any examples where the cost to an applicant is acting as a significant deterrent to investment. Most likely the decision to lodge an application is a complex matter which planning only has a minor role in.

9. To what extent are high occupation costs in England likely to be due to planning constraints, or due to other factors such as imperfect competition or lack of transparency in the land market? What is the economic impact of these costs in terms of the main drivers of productivity?

- As for Question 8. Planning constraints would form part of the equation but other land use regulations and social and political reforms would also contribute to high occupation costs and should also be examined equally and acknowledged for impact.

10. How does the planning system impact on competition, through influencing barriers to entry and exit and economies or scale? If there are areas where there is a negative impact, how can these be addressed, while protecting other goals of the planning system?

- As for Question 9. Planning is about balancing often conflicting interests and needs. As a Council we must remain impartial and cannot be seen to actively foster competitive interests through land use policy, but must always be striving towards achieving the objective of sustainable development.
- Regarding competition and innovation, planning could potentially go further by considering opportunities to enhance business, through designation of special areas, but it is questionable whether this is really its function?

11. To what extent does the planning system effectively support innovation through fostering the formation of business clusters and wider agglomeration of economic activity?

- To a limited extent, by the establishment of business improvements districts and other designated areas for innovation. A local example is Cane Hill, Coulsdon which has been identified in the London Plan, and in turn the UDP, as a preferred location for a Science and Business Innovation Park.

12. Do planning authorities have the skills and resources required to help promote sustainable economic development? If not, what is the best way to ensure that resources match the challenges the system faces? Are there ways to increase further efficiency of process?

- The drive and determination yes, but not always the skills and resources, key drivers of productivity. Lots of competing demands regularly divide Officers time and there is no easy way to resolve this.

13. Are the new arrangements for stakeholder engagement in the plan-making process succeeding in engaging those representing economic interests, including SMEs? If not, what are the barriers to that engagement and how might they be addressed?

- Initial thinking is that there is no reason why they shouldn't succeed, however the reality may be that often businesses have too many demands to be properly engaged.

14. Are there ways that the incentive structure for decision-makers and local communities can be improved so that a balance is achieved between local interests and the interests of the wider community regarding proposals for economic development?

- This question is unclear as to the nature of the incentive structure. The Council is committed to pursuing the achievement of sustainable communities under PPS1 guidance and this is reflected in the UDP and LDF/LDS.

15. Economic development can help achieve the regeneration and renaissance of urban and rural areas. Are there ways which planning could strengthen economic performance in regions, sub-regions (including city regions) and at the local level?

- Locally by receiving clear, coordinated and common goals and objectives from Central and Regional Government backed up by a consistent commitment to resources for delivery, and the invocation of a period of "settled change".

Conclusion

Setting the right framework for land use planning is crucial. The review questions have a clear bias towards the impact of the planning system on economic growth and the review per se must also take account of environmental and social variables and the complex synergies and trade offs among them that influence the delivery of growth, prosperity and well being.

The Council looks forward to future opportunities to comment on this review and request to be kept informed of its outcomes and implications.

Yours sincerely,

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Allan Webber', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Allan Webber
HEAD OF POLICY AND STRATEGY TEAM