

## **Barker Review of land use planning**

### **Comments of Cherwell DC, Oxfordshire**

The questions below are a summarised version of those asked by the Barker Review.

#### **1. Is the planning system sufficiently flexible and responsive?**

We feel the real question is perhaps are we as a nation getting the balance right between the three pillars of a sustainable future: environmental goals, economic goals and social goals. The recent review of the planning system had admirable objectives – simplicity, speed and predictability, community engagement and customer focus - but is in danger of ridiculous over sophistication. Ever time one picks up a planning article it is a demand to load even more requirements on a creaking system to solve society's problems. This is a long long way from the aspirations of the humble 1947 Planning Act. It is becoming to many practitioners a classic case of the best being the enemy of the good.

If we want the system to produce more flexibility and responsiveness to economic changes, we must be prepared as a society to give up a “gold-plated” system. The new plan system despite the changes will not be capable of responding quickly to the rapid social and economic challenges we are beginning to experience – compare the pace at which other strategy documents can be changed radically if required eg Economic strategies. Many practitioners consider that it is expected to do too much and to address too many issues in too much depth. It is also bogged down in legalistic matters.

There is a strong case for a less complex, more robust system which society acknowledges cannot be “gold-plated”. Society as a whole needs to be clearer about what its expectations are of the planning system, and how it wishes those expectations to be prioritised.

One very important issue is that we are tending to let “plan-making” dominate the debate - what really counts is *implementing the plan* – and the Government needs to require LPAs to concentrate resources on delivering on economic delivery targets as much as the dreaded housing delivery targets.

#### **2. Views on the different levels of plans in the new system?**

One can argue and debate about the hierarchy and scope of spatial plans for a long time. What is important with any spatial plan is the ability to deliver it effectively. The emerging SE Plan has tried to highlight more than most the need to have the wherewithal to deliver the plan rather than it becoming a wish list. This moves the debate on from “plan-making” to how the various agencies proactively implement the plan.

Overall the track record from central Government on joined up delivery on a spatial basis is absolutely abysmal, which makes it a nightmare for LPAs trying to coordinate an uncoordinated mish-mash of infrastructure strategies and plans.

There has to be much more emphasis from Govt Depts down on coordinated delivery – transport is a classic example of the reality of Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the lack of clarity on the future of the A34 in Oxon.

#### **3. Achieving the right balance between economic and environmental goals?**

Society as a whole needs to be clearer about what its expectations are of the planning system, and how it wishes those expectations to be prioritised. Many important issues cannot be adequately valued in economic terms. And yet most businesses prefer an attractive, properly functioning environment if they can obtain it.

**4. What could we learn from overseas systems of planning?**

Not in a position to comment - but there may be important lessons about local agencies having adequate resources and capacity to proactively deliver and implement spatial plans effectively.

**5. What is the impact of planning on business investment and how do you assess the recent reforms to the planning system?**

We do not believe that the system has been welcomed by the business community as it is possibly more complex and opaque than before.

For example the work on the SE Plan and the Central Oxon element has been completely dominated by housing issues and there has been in truth very little consideration of crucial economic issues. Community engagement tends to be swamped by local residents rather than local business

**6. Is the planning system sufficiently “joined up” with other Government policy?**

There is a huge and growing variety of government strategies and policies, with which spatial plans are expected to interface and these present LPAs with a huge and growing variety of conflicting objectives.

It is important to have a clear statement of “the Government’s sustainable economic development objectives”, to which all Government departments and agencies subscribed, and that could be used as a benchmark against which to assess the soundness and then the delivery of the plans.

Integration between land use and transport is particularly vital to the achievement of economic goals. The links between them need to be more explicitly recognised by Government. It is noted that Sir Rod Eddington has been set a very similar remit in his separate study of transport and its impact on the economy.

**7. Does the planning system give too much, or too little emphasis, on speed in dealing with major projects?**

It is wrong to view time spent on public consultation as unnecessary delay to the process but this must be subject to some limits as the public are now sophisticated enough to drag out any contentious issue. Planning decisions on development have to be taken from the best information available.

With regard to the processes and timetables, the Heathrow Terminal 5 inquiry is a good example where clear timetable and process would have been beneficial, coupled with a clearer statement of national airports policy.

A robust policy framework – often at national level - is vital but often lacking. It is trite to say so but decent planning and preparation can avoid many problems for the developer later on in the process.

**8. Do the direct costs of planning applications deter investment? Can the regulatory burden be reduced?**

We have no evidence to suggest that the direct costs of planning are deterring investment at present.

We are however not comfortable with the accepted practice brought in in the 1980s of trying to make the developer pay for a range of basic public services that the taxpayer used to fund – eg roads and transport, and affordable housing – through a very imperfect system of planning obligations. This becomes not a discussion about planning but an accountancy/valuation exercise to assess (imperfectly) what a scheme might stand in economic terms.

The Planning Gain Supplement (if introduced) might offer a fairer, simpler and more robust system to raise investment in key infrastructure.

The plethora of assessments (Environmental Impact Assessment, etc.) which are now required to accompany larger applications will have added considerably to their cost. These also add considerably to the costs incurred by LPAs in evaluating them, particularly when lack of skills or capacity makes it necessary to use consultants for the purpose.

Consideration might be given to whether “gold-plated” assessments are absolutely necessary and whether there is scope for a simpler approach.

**9. Are high occupation costs due to planning constraints?**

High occupation costs in parts of the South East must reflect the limited supply of land, in a prosperous and crowded region.

It is often argued that the quality of the environment is an important part of the region’s competitive advantage.

**10. Does the planning system impact on competition?**

One could usefully use the Oxford Green Belt as a test case. This must constrain to some degree the level and range of investment in Oxfordshire as a whole (certainly the view of the two universities) but many consider it sacrosanct in planning terms.

However, we need a mature debate about such constraints as the Green Belt vis a vis sustainability in the context of the SE Plan and that is not happening so far.

**11. Does the planning system support innovation by fostering the formation of clusters?**

We have no evidence to offer.

**12. Do planning authorities have the skills and resources needed to promote sustainable economic development?**

The issue may be less to do with the skills and resources of the planning staff and more to do with the agenda and priorities set by many LPAs where economic development objectives feature below environmental concerns in their priorities. This underlines need for society having clearer expectations of what it wants from its planning system. Even within the Government and its various agencies there are mixed messages about this.

One very important issue is that we are tending to let “plan-making” dominate the debate - what really counts is *implementing the plan* – and the Government needs to require LPAs to concentrate resources on delivering on economic delivery targets as much as housing delivery targets.

We do not believe that the new system has been welcomed by the business community as it is possibly more complex and opaque than before. For example the work on the SE Plan and the Central Oxon element has been completely dominated by housing issues and there has been in truth very little consideration of crucial economic issues. Community engagement tends to be swamped by local residents rather than local business.

We need best practice on both sides to secure better engagement between planning and the business community.

**13. Are the new stakeholder engagement arrangements working for those representing economic interests?**

We do not believe they are working well. The house-building debate is dominating most engagement with the local community, and especially the agendas of local politicians in prosperous areas like Oxon with minimal unemployment. It is always very difficult to engage with the “business community” as it tends not to be any sort of community with common aims or common voice.

The Government needs to require LPAs to concentrate resources on delivering on economic delivery targets as much as housing delivery targets.

The Government’s desire for greater stakeholder involvement is admirable, but the complexity and opacity of the new LDF is too difficult to engage with. Conventional methods of consultation are failing to engage many of those groups who will be most affected by the outcomes of the planning process.

**14. Could incentives for decision-makers be improved, to better balance local interests and those of the wider community?**

The Government needs to require LPAs to concentrate resources on delivering on economic delivery targets as much as housing delivery targets.

Public opposition to development in the South East stems from perceptions that the provision of key physical and social infrastructure has not kept pace with the rate of growth.

Delivering on key physical and social infrastructure would give the whole planning system the “cred” it sorely lacks today.

**15. How could planning strengthen economic performance at strategic and local levels?**

Main suggestions:

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- clearer consensus about the expectations of the planning system in economic terms ;
- setting agreed economic delivery targets as well as housing delivery targets;
- better understanding of trade-offs between environmental, social and economic objectives;
- building on the best of the new system and de-cluttering the system;
- reducing the complexity of development control and extending permitted development in various ways which produce system focused on the bigger issues;

- reviewing the value of the gold-plated procedures;
- engaging with a more representative cross-section of the community, including the business community;
- build in proper provision of infrastructure needed to support development into delivery plans;
- better integration of land use and transport;
- more joined up government strategies at the top of system.

**Cherwell DC would be happy to contribute to further work on this important issue.**