

BARKER TWO

SOME COMMENTS FROM

THE BRISTOL PORT COMPANY

Introduction

These comments, submitted by the Bristol Port Company (TBPC), are based on the consideration of Barker Review of Land Use Planning: Call for Evidence dated 24 January 2006. This response is structured by reference to the questions raised in the Call for Evidence paper.

Response to Barker Questions

Q1. Planning has become a bureaucratic tool. Overtime it has lost much of its ability to be flexible and innovative; it has become hidebound by policies that are often reactive rather than prescriptive, are negative or circumscribed by self-defeating criteria, and are often a reflection of political “nimbyism”. As a port company we have witnessed the increasing globalisation of trade, at Bristol this has meant a trebling of trade in the last 14 years and we demonstrate the fastest growth of any non-ferry port in England.

Whilst we welcome the scope for more strategic thinking inherent in the enhanced status of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) we fear that on the evidence of that for the South West, which has a time horizon of 2026, insufficient thought has been given to identifying the state of the region 20 years ahead. If the longer term RSS is to have any meaning in an economic sense, by being able to relate to evolving economic circumstances, it is critical that it considers not merely the local/regional position but of world factors e.g. globalisation of manufacturing, finance, knowledge etc. These factors will transcend local parochial constraints and planners must become more “forward thinkers” not simply rely on trend forecasting. (Some of these concerns go to the training and education of planners.)

Q2. Initial perception is the new system is too complex, even for professionals involved in it. The Bristol Port Company (TBPC) see some hope for the regional perspective, subject to the caveats mentioned above. There is some concern regarding the quality of the politicians involved in the Regional Assembly may not be up to the task of thinking “regionally”. (One representative with a Dorset constituency openly spoke at a regional transport meeting that he took as his remit the securing of what he could for his area whilst ensuring that nothing “nasty” appeared in his patch.)

Much of the success of the new planning system will depend upon the practioners and at the regional level the introduction of responsive monitoring and review procedures. There is some concern with the bureaucratisation of the planning process that there is an inordinate inability to think creatively in a joined-up way. (The Government’s obsession with targets upon which financial reward is made, the Planning Supplementary Grant, does not help in this respect.)

TBPC in the past five years sought to expand its estate to accommodate a growth of trade. The relevant LPA was confronted with demand for additional housing land, for realigning the Green Belt and for accommodating the port's requirements, within a limited area. The LPA granted permission for the additional housing, took account of changes to the Green Belt but nowhere is there any transparent evidence that they considered the three aspects together to ascertain how they interrelated and how the balance of benefits and disbenefits influenced their decisions. Decisions are made individually without recourse to the implications on other decision areas.

Q3. The concept of sustainability has been ambushed largely by the environment lobby. It still tends to dominate and the subsequent attempts by Government to redress the balance by reference to economic and social factors in PPGs have still not made up the ground.

Q4. There is scope always to learn from others. But of paramount importance is the Government structure of other countries. How come France was able to deliver its part of the Euro rail system years ahead of the UK sections? Useful to compare but do so carefully.

Q5. Need to appreciate that Authorities can gain reputations for being helpful and pro development or being anti development and growth. Reputations can be built and surrendered very quickly and the word in the market place, justified or unjustified, can be very influential. This is almost an "invisible" factor but can be very important.

The contribution of the new planning system to investment, to transparency, and creating certainty is too soon to comment upon. An initial perception is one of muddle, not least because of the "period of transition" and the question could be more meaningfully answered in 5 years time.

Q6 No it is not sufficiently joined up but neither are most of the government's policies and programmes. (On this account one fears for the SPG initiative controlled centrally and distributed locally). There is some evidence that in the South West the RSS and other regional strategies, economy, transport etc are becoming more compatible but so much of this is down to timing and personalities. The lack of elected Regional Assemblies might have some impact on future relationships.

Q7 Governments obsession with targets is a major retrogressive step. Most business would favour quality of decision over speed especially when the rejection of a proposal is merely a reflection of an artificial time scale rather than real meaning. The idea of agreed committed programmes for complicated applications would be an advantage for all concerned.

Q8 Not generally thought that planning costs are a major element although the increasing demand for more and more information and studies can create unnecessary expense; especially if the Authority lacks the expertise to deal with the issue being reported upon e.g. the contents of EIAs is a good example. Cost can soar however when major Inquires are involved e.g. Southampton Port expansion at Dibden Bay is reckoned to have meant the planning case cost between £80-£100 million and for a refusal. Not too many projects can bear such a cost.

Q11 “Clusters” can have some relevance to the ports industry. These are essentially trade related. Consideration needs to be given to how these might change over the next twenty years. The planning system makes reference to clusters from time to time but without appearing to understand what they mean and what the role of planning might be.

Q12 Not believed to be the case. Local Authorities often give someone the label of “economic development officer” without that person having anything but a distant understanding of what economic development comprises. This lack of skills is deep-seated and cannot be remedied overnight.

Q13. What are SMEs? There are too many acronyms about and the government is the main culprit. A consultation planning document recently had 4 pages devoted to the explanation of terms and acronyms. This is a barrier to involvement. Evidence from local Statements of Community Involvement suggest that LAs fail to appreciate the need to better understand the economic interests but this might reflect political concerns of trying to avoid difficult decisions. (This is not always the case and the relevant Bristol Planning Cttee recently unanimously supported TBPC’s application for wind turbines.)

Q15 There are many ways planning can get involved and encourage economic development. The increasing number of those involved in regeneration has been a major shift in the past decade. Planners have made a contribution and there is scope for more, greater links between those preparing RSS and RES, more supportive positive policies, etc but involvement must have direct benefits and be informative.

Additional Comments.

The overall, general impression is that the planning system is essentially obstructive as far as business is concerned. The truth of this undoubtedly varies around the country. In local politics there is often a reluctance or inability to confront the difficult decisions. (A local example was that notwithstanding TBPC making some twenty representations on the North Somerset Replacement Local Plan, several involving the strategic matter of port expansion, the political working group considering the representations, under officer guidance, never once discussed port related matters but spent time on local issues, like the name of a regeneration area, the status of an individual village etc.

More time to forward thinking, to use imagination and to be perceived as being less restrictive and more prescriptive but within an essentially market economy.

Forward planning must be seen to be coherent, consistent and transparent. There are many skills to be honed in this area of planning from the quality of the process to the design of policies which often appear to be so negative.