

The New Planning System – The English National Parks’ Experience

Introduction

- Based on straw poll of English National Park
 - Chief Planners
 - Heads of Planning Policy
- May not all subscribe to any particular suggestion
- Intended to provide flavour, rather than detail

The New System in Context

- Changes in Government policy
- Changes in formal procedures
- Implementation of the new system

Best things about the new system

- “Pass”
- “Can’t think of any yet”
- Emphasis on strategic thinking (Core Strategy)
- Potential to integrate planning policy with corporate planning (e.g. Nat. Park Management Plan)
- Annual Monitoring Report – focus on effectiveness
- Flexibility of separate Development Plan Documents
- Spatial planning – shared responsibility for implementation
- Good references to protection, enhancement, and design

Worst things about the new system

- Complexity – difficult for public/communities
- Consultation overload
- Bureaucratic – too process driven; over-prescriptive; too many stages; confusing names; very difficult to explain
- Too expensive and resource hungry
- Starting everything at once is “ridiculous and unnecessary”
- Over-emphasis on targets
- Still too slow
- Guidance doesn’t address the difference in preparing policy for National Parks
- Drawing supplementary planning guidance into statutory system - unnecessary, slow, unwieldy
- Frontloading difficult – myth of consensus-building; consultation overload
- Being forced to evaluate unfeasible options

Changes sought

- Simplify and reduce prescription
- Phase introduction of system
- Abolish Statement of Community Involvement – replace with simple statement in Local Development Scheme?
- Reduce number of phases for each document
- Provide separate Planning Policy Statement for National Parks?
- More resources!

How are English National Parks coping?

- “...significant delays due to staff vacancies”
- “We haven’t really started”
- “Coping? We were before 2/3rds of our tiny team left”
- “Well, in the circumstances, but timetable has slipped”
- “Difficult, but trying to embrace new principles”
- “We are too busy processing documents to do any real planning. The first two years’ documents (LDS, SCI, Core Strategy) won’t make any difference to policy, but the bureaucratic workload prevents us from implementing existing commitments or tackling issues that are arising.”

Do resources match the new demands? Is PDG significant?

- Using Planning Delivery Grant to hire additional staff and/or consultants, but anxious about what will happen when this finishes
- It is costing more, and will continue to do so
 - Staff; Consultants; Adverts; Much more paper; More rounds of consultation
- Hard to find experienced staff with the right skills.
- Targets mean resources are concentrated on dealing with planning applications, rather than policy work

What is Authority Members’ perception of the new system?

- “I get the feeling they are very confused”
- “They think the new system is dreadful”
- “They have little appetite for it”
- Difficult to persuade them to prioritise it for resources, as the benefits are not clear to them or the public
- “No real problems here, although many share our frustrations of [it being] too complex and taking on the worst of the old system”

Has the system helped with National Park Management Plan & corporate planning?

- Has the potential to be better and more clearly linked, though excessive legislative prescription doesn’t help
- Rush to get all new system in place at once has got in the way of doing the Management Plan, or means they are out of sync, in some National Parks
- Will take time to change perceptions about what is possible and desirable

Has it changed the way the Authority relates to the public?

- “It’s just confusing them”
- “... has allowed us to undertake a lot of high level engagement”
- “We’ve previously been doing a lot of community engagement work, so I don’t feel it will change the way we relate to the public”
- “Mainly ‘no’.”
- “Not yet, but it will probably lead to slightly better forms of public consultation”

Has it changed the way the Authority relates to the public?

“I don’t think I can face it!”

(Quote from previously engaged member of the public asking to be taken off consultation list because they feel bombarded with repetitive consultation papers.)

How are the new strategic arrangements (RSS)?

- “Much less of a problem with this [due to our geography] on the edge of the region... Only one of many voices. If things did start to go against us we probably would be a lone voice”
- “No local political accountability – community engagement impossible at a regional level”
- “At officer level fine, but number of meetings is difficult. Member wise more difficult because of strength of [urban areas].”
- “No real problems”

Does the new system help the National Park achieve the Government ambitions for planning?

- “No”
- Changes in Government view on issues (e.g. what we can do about housing) are “far more helpful than revising the process of development plans”
- “Just not convinced that greater public participation will lead to greater consensus or more effective policy”

How can the voluntary sector help?

- Important that the national and other wider interests aren’t drowned out by local residents’ views – have they the capacity to deal with the volume of consultations?
- Some organisations (e.g CPRE) have helped with research and held local seminars.
- “Important they realise how important it is to comment at the policy formulation stage – too late at planning application stage if they don’t like the policies.”

Summary

- Generally welcome the changes and broader outlook in planning policy
- Find the new system very bureaucratic, over-prescribed, and taking a lot of resources, without any clear advantages
- Rush to get it all in place at once has been particularly problematic
- English National Parks are doing innovative work, and looking to make the most of opportunities in the new arrangements