

Realising the Economic Potential of the Wider South East

Technical symposium, 25 October 2019, 8 Fitzroy Street, W1T 4BJ

Organised and run by the London & Wider South East strategic planning network and Arup

Supported by the Southern Policy Centre, Centre for London, and Design South East

A few headline messages from the speakers:

- The importance of agreeing a shared agenda with London (e.g. on innovation, raising productivity in the consumer services sector, understanding the spatial interdependence within public services like hospitals, inclusion, immigration), rather than seeing the Home Counties as the solution to London's housing crisis (John Denham).
- The need for genuine devolution to areas with appropriate governance structures and with which people identify, not merely as a way of implementing Whitehall selected priorities (John Denham).
- Never waste a crisis - the climate emergency is a potential issue that could put the rockets under identifying a regional agenda (John Denham).
- There is no shared understanding of the functional geography of the WSE and what's driving trends (Christopher Tunnell).
- Social justice should be an aim of strategic planning, with a more explicit emphasis on linking needs and employment opportunities (Christopher Tunnell).
- Investment in infrastructure supports long term change: political and policy continuity is crucial and monitoring of economic and development outcomes must be realistic (Kate Barker).
- Having no political affiliations and no statutory remit has been an advantage for the Regional Plan Association New York and given them licence to think big and challenge short termism (Tom Wright).
- Getting the right geographical building blocks in place in terms of areas that local residents identify with, is crucial for the success of strategic planning initiatives (Catriona Riddell).
- LEP actions to improve productivity can include employer skills strategies and targeting support on businesses with the most potential for growth, including improving supply of grow-on space (Hilary Chipping).
- Strategic transport planning must increasingly be about planning for people and places not extrapolating traffic levels. Scenarios are a useful way of envisaging and analysing alternative futures (Rupert Clubb).

For information and comments on particular sub regional initiatives, see the event slides:

- seeking a shared narrative for the Central South area (John Denham)
- aims of the Oxford Cambridge Arc from the NIC perspective (Kate Barker) and from the South East Midlands LEP perspective (Hilary Chipping)
- findings from the Cambridge and Peterborough Independent Economic Review, now largely included in the 2019 Local Industrial Strategy (Kate Barker)
- a new style place leadership strategy for Surrey (Catriona Riddell)
- the challenges of political change affecting the Oxfordshire joint plan (Catriona Riddell)
- objectives of the draft regional transport strategy for the South East (Rupert Clubb).

Recurring themes during the day:

Strategic planning and evidence

Strategic planning is about far more than housing numbers. It needs to move beyond the first level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in providing for shelter. One of the breakout groups referred to coordinating high level inter- agency work across health, equality, transport, 5G reception. Another breakout group described strategic planning as about story telling not just numbers. Catriona Riddell saw strategic planners as ringmasters mediating between many different bodies. They need to be visionaries and to provide a stronger place story. A lack of strategic planning capacity will need training initiatives.

It takes courage and political will to produce a strategic vision. Political will in part depends on being able to explain how strategic planning helps to achieve a wider agenda. Arguably a shared understanding of where growth is planned in the WSE would help the current preparation of regional transport strategies, and also planning for water and waste management, and energy generation and transmission. Too many new community proposals within the South East are distant from public transport routes (Catriona Riddell). Instead, a spatial concept based on public transport corridors and arcs could be envisaged (see Christopher Tunnell's final slide).

The importance of mapping was reinforced by both speakers and participants, in particular to illustrate complex strategic issues and relationships. There is currently a lack of alignment between areas of economic growth and housing growth (see analysis in Christopher Tunnell's presentation) – such maps could provide a valuable context for local plan preparation. But there is a need for consistency in data (different population and household projections across the London boundary need explaining). Doing data and evidence collection on a joint basis would improve consistency and be more cost effective. Existing bodies (GLA, EELGA and SEEC) could carry out this coordinating role, subject to there being political will. There is also a need for a strategic approach to assessments under the Habitats Regulations, on flood risk and surface water, and in producing regional climate change audits.

To implement strategic planning aspirations will require stronger delivery mechanisms. Local authority planning is currently weak and under resourced. Participants voted for housing affordability as the greatest challenge facing the WSE. Tackling this issue is not possible under the current planning system with its emphasis on housing numbers. Providing significantly more affordable housing will require government funding. There is a case for a regional response to delivery including learning from good practice rather than producing a regional plan (John Denham).

Institutional frameworks

Institutional fragmentation holds back strategic planning, affecting both government funding decisions and local government. Participants voting on what they considered to be the greatest barrier to joint working within the Wider South East, mentioned most frequently "political fiefdoms" and lack of government enthusiasm. Instead public policy should incentivise collaboration (John Denham). The perception that London and the WSE get more than their fair share of government funding, lack of a clear regional voice, and too many small local authorities were rated as the greatest challenges to investment in the wider region.

A lot of interest was generated by hearing about the success of the Regional Plan Association New York, not least because of its independent structure and its ability to challenge political short termism. All the breakout groups reported interest in understanding more about how the RPA operates and considering the transferability of this model to London and the Wider South East. Potential interest in being involved in such an organisation could come from professional service organisations, water and energy utilities, waste management companies, transport operators, patient investors in the development industry, academics and think tanks.

Joint commissioning of research was strongly supported by one breakout group, where involved organisations would contribute. Commissioning some academic work in a way that helps public sector thinking was also mentioned, with a comparable being the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, funded by Government involving a range of institutions led by Glasgow University.

Another breakout group recommended looking at Wales as a good example of moving forward for regional planning – a more holistic approach. An interesting feature is the role of the Welsh Future Commissioner with the ability to challenge public sector policy thinking.

Corinne Swain based on the event recordings and notes from colleagues
9 November 2019