

## **Note of LWSE Network/ MHCLG meeting 14.1.21**

Kevin Reid (MHCLG), Duncan Bowie, Chris Tunnell, Catriona Riddell

MHCLG was focusing on strategic planning elements of Planning WP over next couple of months- KR was leading on this. He was considering a range of options.

MHCLG was still processing responses to Planning WP.

Timetable for Devolution WP. Publication could not coincide with local and Mayoral elections, but possible deferment of elections till later in the year would allow more time. It was recognised proposal to require all LAs to be on a unitary basis had generated negative responses from some districts. CR pointed out that this proposal had jeopardised collaboration between county and district authorities.

Proposals for strategic planning were not necessarily dependent on govt decisions on devolution and local government reform, and would need to be applicable irrespective of specific local government structures. It was noted that both the County Councils Network proposals and the Network proposals were also intended to be flexible.

It was noted that inadequate inter-authority co-operation had been a significant factor in the rejection or delayed adoption of local plans.

Progressing local plans remained a key priority for the Government. However, it was recognised that there needed to be a more strategic approach and that cross-boundary issues needed to be resolved if Govt 300,000 new homes a year target and major infrastructure projects were to be delivered. There were also concerns that major new settlements supported by the government were being obstructed by local authorities or being rejected at planning inquiries.

DB summarised the proposals in the LWSE Network paper.

There was a discussion as to whether strategic inter-authority planning needed to be on a statutory basis or could be in the form of an agreed non-statutory spatial vision. Given focus of Govt in progressing local plans, it was important that any new requirements for inter-authority co-operation assisted rather than delayed this progress.

One perspective was that any strategic approach should focus on housing supply and major infrastructure and that other matters could be left to Local Plans. Ministers were unlikely to be supportive of re-establishing a statutory strategic planning process and were focused on processes which were locally driven and where inter-authority collaboration was voluntary rather than imposed.

There was a discussion how an inter-authority agreed spatial vision could reduce local political tensions over release of development land, especially in relation to release of Green Belt land. A spatial vision would identify broad areas for potential development, while leaving the issue of specific site allocations to local plans. This had been the London Plan approach in relation to Opportunity Areas. It was noted that joint local plans (as opposed to strategic plans or visions) could agree specific land allocations across participating planning authorities. It was noted that most of

the proposed major new settlements were in Green Belts and that areas with high housing targets were largely Green Belt authorities and that this issue could not be avoided if Government targets were to be delivered. See: <https://www.planoraks.com/posts-1/well-now-we-really-need-to-talk-about-the-green-belt?s=09>

It was noted that strategic planning could also provide guidance to transport and utility providers as well as to Highways England and government departments on investment priorities. It was also noted that reviews of green belt release were best contextualised within comprehensive Strategic housing land availability assessments (SHLAAS) which informed a review and analysis of different spatial development options rather than as stand-alone projects.

DB suggested that the minimum required was a reintroduction of Statements of Common Purpose as a component for Local Plan examination and approval, with clear guidance from MHCLG on what was required within such statements and the grouping of Local Authorities to be party to the statement. KR commented that this might be a useful step, though noted that Ministers might not be that supportive of geographical groupings of LAs being determined nationally.

There was a discussion of the important planning role of County Councils in relation to minerals and waste and environmental assets and that they needed to be party to any strategic planning framework including Statements of Common Purpose. Any framework also needed to include transport bodies and utility providers. The importance of both Highways England and Homes England being party to strategic planning arrangements and plan delivery in terms of spatial application of investment resources was critical.

There was a discussion of how to resource any technical unit to support a wider London and South East planning framework, as whatever the political level governance structure adopted, whether statutory, advisory or informal, professional support was essential. Given the limited planning policy resources within planning authorities, it was not feasible to rely on staff seconded from LAs, especially if participation was on a voluntary basis, and a small stand-alone professional planning unit was required. It was noted that Ministers recognised the need for improved planning resources within LAs, though at present unclear whether any resources should be made available for strategic planning. KR agreed to seek a steer from colleagues and Ministers. DB suggested that the Network could provide a costed proposal when appropriate.

In response to DB raising the issue of MHCLG progressing the issue of wider South East collaboration with the Mayor of London, KR commented that this issue would be pursued once the draft London Plan had been finalised. He was optimistic that the London Plan could be adopted in the near future – the key outstanding issue being that of airports policy. There was a discussion of key contacts in the wider South East, with a suggestion that a key organisation to engage in the network was now South East Strategic leaders' group rather than South East Councils, which no longer included all SE authorities. Other initiatives for coordination in the 'Rest of the South East' were also noted.

KR raised two other issues:

1. The proposed 30-month timescale for Local Plan approval. Examples were given of good practice in preparing spatial visions and individual Local Plans on parallel timescales.
2. The process of approval for Statements of Common Purpose. It was suggested that where local authorities agreed Statements of Common Purpose there was no need for a separate Examination in Public or Ministerial approval. However, where LAs were unable to agree such a statement in

compliance with MHCLG requirements, Ministerial intervention would be necessary. It was noted that in the case of combined authority plans (or City regional Mayor structures other than the London Mayor), a requirement for unanimity was problematic, and arrangements for majority decisions could be put in place. The NPPF should be explicit that inter-authority non-statutory plans or strategic vision documents should be a material consideration in relation to Local Plans.

KR thanked LWSE network representatives for their suggestions. A verbal report on this meeting would be given to the Network meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> January, but the meeting note not circulated beyond attendees.

DB