

## Hibernation or Gestation time for the Plan of Plans? *Edward Dawson\**

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ODIHAM lies outside the South East Plan sub-region called the 'Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley'. The Plan has been called 'the Plan of Plans', as it replaces the old Hampshire Structure Plan. Outside the sub-region, the rural character of Odiham is assured, but it could be compromised quite easily by the development pressures around it, such as New Growth Points. Pressures come from the Plan, and from emerging government policies.

I have previously mentioned Kate Barker's *Review of Land Use Planning*. Her report published late last year, considered how planning can deliver economic growth, and other sustainability goals. Being restricted to economics, the danger is that Barker will weaken controls and promote conflicts. Planning has long been thought to strangle initiative, and this may be the latest attempt to loosen its grip.

Sir Rod Eddington, former British Airways Chief Executive, issued his *Transport Study* last December. He was commissioned by the Chancellor to look at transport investment to promote economic growth. His advice was quite helpful; that investment should be focused on existing transport networks, especially in the South East, which is essential to the country's economic well being. A seminal report from Sir Nicholas Stern on the *Economics of Climate Change* completed the picture providing compelling evidence that greenhouse gas emissions impact both on the environment, and on economic growth.

It is interesting that all three reports centre on the needs of the economy. Of course, we should all be positive about the economy; the problem is that it needs to be re-oriented towards a system that husbands the planet's resources and protects its unique environment. The South East already thinks of itself as a global region. How far its future can be regarded as secure, will be a cardinal test of its long term sustainability.

### **Examination in Public**

Meanwhile, the EIP of the South East Plan finished in March 2007. The EIP Panel, chaired by Corinne Swain, has proved to be both independent-minded and quietly forceful. CPRE South East has played a

prominent role, with a regular attendance and presence at the table. The role of participants has been to test and challenge the basis of the Plan. We did this in an objective manner, and without adopting a partisan approach.

### **Issues range widely around the Region**

A wide range of issues have been canvassed by the Panel. The main aspects where a 'Regional Spatial Strategy' has a role are to define a spatial strategy; set levels of development and form sub-regions. Other elements are of less direct relevance, but provide the context. Aspects such as social policy, or culture and heritage are important, but decisions on them are determined nationally or locally.

The Plan has to present a comprehensive spatial strategy for the whole region. The strategy is said to be rather urban based, with an emphasis on the potential to accommodate future growth in the sub-regions. The balance between urban and rural policy was always poor. The key test of soundness should rest on meeting infrastructure requirements and economic regeneration prospects, as well as environmental and local acceptability. It did not seem that the spatial distribution followed from the objectives of sustainability and deliverability; good and clear implementation was also vital.

### **Rural Housing unstuck**

Rural housing has been an EIP topic, and the current 30,000 long term empty homes in the South East have been raised. Many vacant properties return to use naturally, but there remains in each district ward a hard core of long term voids. Only 16 per cent of the Regional Housing budget is devoted to this.

Research shows there is still a problem of rural affordable housing. However, the backlog could be met by the provision of 350 new units each year for 10 years. The research also shows that 950 households form each year that are unable to afford market purchase or private rental. There is apparently no case for increasing funding in small villages. There is, it seems, no evidence that providing affordable housing in such circumstances guarantees the sustainability of communities. A more sustainable solution appears to be targeting

funding towards larger country towns. Evidence of the housing supply and need 'balance' is generally improving. However, provision still falls short of the assessed need for 70 per cent of new affordable housing to be social rented.

### **Water remains hard in the South East**

Water supply and quality is another key issue at the EIP, and the think tank IPPR has considered the water challenges for the South East. Their aim is to transform the market towards a water efficient lifestyle. The Government's 'energy efficiency commitment' is apparently producing effective results nationally. So a water efficiency commitment is now proposed by IPPR.

The Government is considering making energy companies responsible for customers' behavioural change. The impacts of this, if it were applied to the water sector, might be considerable. Water efficiency would have to become an intrinsic part of water companies' overall business plans.

We should all encourage a wide range of people to enter into the water debate. Stern on the economics of climate change asserts that global warming has become an important economic issue rather than just an environmental concern. Water efficiency may need to be an economic as well as an environmental issue, and thus be taken more seriously.

The EIP Panel is now considering its report, due in July. Will they plump for housing numbers higher than 28,900 a year; will they even go for 36,000? The latest 2003-based demographic projections appear to show a need for 36,000. How can this statistical projection be turned into a 'housing requirement' figure? Does the region have the capacity to support such growth? Will the Panel accept or re-define the Western Corridor, and what does this mean for the sub-region, and for Odiham?

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**March 2007**