

# Spatial Plans in Practice

## Supporting the reform of spatial planning

### **An update**

The Spatial Plans in Practice project has now been running for 18 months. This month, we are able to report on several key workstreams and share what we have learnt about the preparation of development plan documents and the implementation of the spatial planning approach. This information is intended to help local planning authorities and their partners in the preparation of Local Development Frameworks (LDFs), as well as provide feedback about progress on a national level.

This bulletin highlights the key findings from each of the following research activities:

- Longitudinal case studies;
- Thematic study 2: Preparing core strategies;
- Literature and expert reviews;
- Strategic survey.

### **Longitudinal case studies**

The first round of visits to the 25 case study authorities was completed in January 2006. Based upon detailed consideration of documentary and interview evidence, we have produced the first lessons report. The research generated a wealth of material across a range of themes and provides a valuable insight into the experiences of these local authorities. The report focuses on two matters that are pressing for all involved with preparing LDFs:

- Making timely progress;
- How policy can be integrated towards a spatial planning approach through wider involvement.

### **Making timely progress towards the delivery of planning policy – Key Lessons:**

- Local authorities should make full use of the flexibility provided by the new system, and make more use of the Local Development Scheme (LDS) as a project management tool that sets a concise and robust programme;
- The review of the LDS is an important and essential opportunity to re-evaluate the set of documents, their objectives, content, and execution – a clear understanding of the reasons for any delay is essential and a strategy for mitigating future delays should be included;
- Communities and Local Government and Government Offices have an important role to remind local authorities of the primary purpose and role of LDS and in providing assistance and support;
- To ensure the effective use of resources and to maximise opportunities for supplementing resources authorities should continue and improve their work to:
  - secure top level political and management support in bidding for additional resources;
  - develop joint working and flexible staffing arrangements.
- There is a need for appropriate political arrangements to achieve flexibility with high quality member involvement – political commitment to and support for the LDF is fundamental to effective and efficient progress.

### **How policy can be integrated through greater involvement – Key Lessons:**

- The high level aspirations from community strategies should be used in establishing the objectives for the LDF;
- The knowledge and skills from different parts of the local authority should be used and the corporate commitment to particular priorities clearly identified;
- It is essential to enhance internal working arrangements, develop joint working and engage a wide group of sectoral interests as early as possible in the process;
- Engagement with other sectors should not be on the basis of why those sectors should help prepare the planning authority's LDF, but how their own aspirations can be delivered through spatial planning;
- Good working arrangements should be cultivated around any opportunity that arises, and savings made by sharing work between authorities and others.

The analysis of the second round of visits is currently underway – we plan to report lessons relevant to the theme of 'evidence based positive planning' next year.

## **Thematic Study 2: Preparing Core Strategies – Preferred Options Stage**

For the second thematic study within the project, we examined five core strategies that were at the preferred options stage. The research considered case study authorities working in different contexts using interviews and document analysis. A variety of approaches had been adopted across the authorities with examples of good practice and many challenges to be addressed and opportunities to be pursued. The key recommendations are:

### **Local Authorities should:**

- embrace the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) process, develop an interactive relationship and identify local alternatives which ensure consistency between the RSS and LDF;
- formulate and assess appropriate options based on a full understanding of the spatial development conditions prevalent in their area, and explain reasons for choices made;
- use effective methods to involve stakeholders, particularly developers in strategic choices. At the preferred options stage this will require methods that facilitate dialogue and discussion;
- make better use of the Sustainability Appraisal process to aid decision making and option appraisal;
- develop a vision and spatial strategy which is local, aspirational, integrated and robust. Identify local priorities and ensure appropriate decisions are taken to deliver these;
- Implementation plans for options should be communicated clearly and considered early in the process.

### **Communities and Local Government and other enablers of the new system should facilitate learning and the sharing of good practice on:**

- the expectations of the preferred options stage;
- the formulation and evaluation of options;
- the application and management of sustainability appraisal;
- methods to increase stakeholder involvement in strategic policy formulation;
- the essential elements of a spatial strategy, and the use of methods to assess spatial impacts and relationships.

# Literature and Expert Reviews

Reviews were undertaken of literature relevant to three key topics at the heart of the new planning agenda. The purpose of the reviews is two-fold: first, to inform the project by defining the terms and identifying evaluation criteria; and second, to produce summary papers for practitioners and stakeholders.

## Review 1: The role and scope of spatial planning

This summary paper provides an overview of what spatial planning is, concentrating on the principles of the spatial planning approach. It investigates the origins of the ideas shaping spatial planning, the differences between spatial planning and land use planning, and highlights the implications for the plan making system.

## Review 2: Culture change and planning

This summary paper explains the meaning and scope of culture change as it is applied to spatial planning. It identifies the crucial factors that are important in facilitating culture change and illustrates the incentives and challenges related to implementing this agenda.

## Review 3: Achieving successful participation

This summary paper considers why participation is needed, in terms of both the advantages of making well-informed decisions based on a thorough knowledge of stakeholder needs and expectations, and the statutory requirements set out in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. It explores what constitutes effective participation, possible approaches to effective participation and how to overcome the potential barriers.

## Strategic Survey

The latest Strategic Survey to local planning authorities (LPAs) was undertaken in Summer 2006. Many thanks to all respondents. The key findings are:

### Effectiveness of new system

- There are high levels of agreement that the system will be able to deliver on most of its main objectives (e.g., sounder evidence, more sustainable policies, more efficient programme management and stronger community involvement). The exceptions were quicker plan preparation and early decision-making. 46% of LPAs disagreed that the LDF would deliver earlier decision making and 65% disagreed that the new system would deliver quicker plan preparation.
- LPAs were more optimistic about the effectiveness of the LDF process than they had been in 2005 (as reported by the Local Government Association (LGA)).

### Ease of engagement

- 80% of LPAs have found it easy to engage with statutory consultees in the development of the LDF. Similarly, LPAs have found it easy to engage with developers (75%), elected members (77%), and other public sector partners (66%). LPAs have found it less easy to engage with local businesses, local communities and voluntary and community organisations.

### Means of engagement

- 65% of LPAs have engaged with the community in the past through public meetings, exhibitions and leafleting, and plan to do so in the future. Although few LPAs have previously engaged with the community through focus groups and interactive websites, the majority of LPAs intend to utilise these methods at the issues and options and preferred options stages, which indicates progress in using more innovative methods of community engagement.

## Developing the evidence base

- Significant changes to developing evidence have occurred in the past year. Over 80% of LPAs have given more consideration to evidence requirements and over 70% have devoted more resources to developing evidence. However, approximately 60% of LPAs had not “undertaken new methods or techniques” or “trained staff in analytical/appraisal skills”.

### Critical issues

- The most critical issues identified by LPAs that the LDF will seek to address were affordable housing, housing growth and town centres. A second order of critical issues reported were allocating employment land, transport needs, climate change, providing infrastructure, built environment conservation and renewable energy. Least critical issues identified were cultural facilities and tourism.
- “Staff retention and recruitment” is seen as clearly the key challenge by LPAs in delivering the LDF (over 85%). Second most important is “skills, training and experience”, and third is “deadline pressures impacting on quality”.

## Sharing lessons with the Planning Advisory Service

The Planning Advisory Service is working with us to share the main messages and lessons through seminars and summary papers. Information about all Planning Advisory Service activities are available through the website: [www.idea.gov.uk/pas](http://www.idea.gov.uk/pas).