

Briefing



**Friends of
the Earth**

Growing within limits?

The North East England Regional Spatial Strategy

The NE Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) is the region's masterplan. After much debate and consultation, the RSS has become a statutory document determining the region's spatial development up to 2021. The final consultation period on proposed Government changes to the Plan ended on the 6 August 2007 and the final RSS is due early in 2008.

The statutory weight of the RSS means that local councils across the North East will have to conform to it when they draw up 'what happens and where' at a local level, in the form of your local area's Local Development Framework. This briefing sets out the key issues and shows how Friends of the Earth North East's work on the RSS has made a difference and areas we still need to watch.

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WHOSE RSS?

The body responsible for drawing up the RSS is the [North East Regional Assembly](#). This indirectly elected body comprises mostly councillors chosen by each of the region's local authorities to represent them, along with social, economic and environmental partners.

Friends of the Earth North East has been deeply involved in influencing the RSS as it took shape for example through formal consultation phases (a code of practice on consultation is www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation/code/index.asp). In 2006, we attended the public hearings (examination in public) into the RSS led by an independent panel. During the entire process we have involved local groups where this was appropriate.

Ultimately the Government can change the RSS as it sees fit. To view the updated RSS and the proposed changes following the consultation period check the Government Office for the North East website: www.go-ne.gov.uk You will also find an explanation of where material has been changed and justifications of changes following the consultation period – so you can see, if you were involved in this process, whether or not your voice made a difference.

Interestingly there is the inclusion of a new policy on climate change, (RSS May 2007 pvii / P2A p21). This was one of key aims from taking part in the RSS process so we certainly had an impact there. Further, a request for further information regarding a recommendation 'constraining the development of certain major employment sites...' (p viii), although this will be lead to the weaker protection for green belt areas.

PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Government planning policy now recognises that "Sustainable development is the core principle underpinning planning" (PPS1, page 2, objectives for the planning system, No 3). The UK Sustainable Development Strategy gives the guiding principles for all policy as:

- Living within **environmental limits**
- Ensuring a strong, healthy and **just society**
- Achieving a **sustainable economy**
- Promoting **good governance**
- Using **sound science** responsibly

The strategy also makes clear that these goals should be integrated and pursued together, rather than traded off against each other.

The [Regional Spatial Strategy](#) (RSS) expresses ambitions to encourage sustainable development (RSS May 2007 p11/P2 p18) in the region, sharing the five principles of the UK's sustainable development strategy. But it will also:

- Promote **rapid growth** in jobs and housing
- Promote **growth of Newcastle International and Durham Tees Valley airports**, beyond government recommendations
- Tell every local council **how much housing** they have to provide up to 2026
- Set out **priorities for investment in roads** and other forms of transport

And it could:

- Lead to the **removal of green belt protection and the outward expansion of towns** and cities in many areas.

As ever the question is how much principals and commitments to sustainable development on paper will work in practice and if the way land and resources are used in and by the region will lead to a discernible shift to a sustainable pattern of development and low carbon economies.

THE INFLUENCE ON THE PLAN OF THE NORTHERN WAY GROWTH STRATEGY (NWGS)

In February 2004 John Prescott asked the three Northern Regional economic Development Agencies (RDAs) to start work on a strategy that would seek to promote economic growth across the North of England in an attempt to bridge the North-South economic divide.

The RSS focuses on 'City Regions' as the main location for new economic growth. This is a consequence of the influence of the Northern Way Growth Strategy (NWGS) which is itself based on the growing role of city regions in England as drivers for economic growth. Two city regions have been identified for the NE RSS: Tyne & Wear and the Tees Valley.

The three RDAs came up with *The Northern Way* initiative and an aim to promote growth and to "achieve national UK average GVA [Gross Value Added] per head within 25 years".

There are concerns that the North East RSS has become a 'delivery vehicle' for the NWGS's growth ambitions which will ultimately lead to the adoption of unsustainable policies. The concerns are threefold:

- The NWGS focuses on the narrow aim of GVA growth. Aiming for improved economic performance alone does not lead automatically to environmental protection or social inclusion; it can even harm certain forms of economic activity
- Unlike the RSS, the Northern Way is a non-democratically tested plan that has not been subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment
- The NWGS puts great emphasis on long distance connectivity, increasing air transport and freight haulage which poses both environmental and social problems

The draft Plan has been subject to a Strategic Sustainability Assessment, as required by European law, and the independent consultants who carried this out raise similar concerns.

The Integrated Regional Framework (IRF) and the Regional Economic Strategic (RES) provide for an integrated and co-ordinated plan of action and long term proposals to increase the NE economy (RSS 2007, p13).

RSS AND CLIMATE CHANGE TARGETS

An area where we have had an impact on the RSS is the inclusion of a new climate change policy (RSS May 2007 pvii/P2A p21).

Policy 2A of the NE RSS states that the region will take measures to mitigate against climate change through helping the region meet IRF targets reducing greenhouse gas emissions to, at least 12% below 1990 levels by 2010 and carbon dioxide levels to at least 20% below 1990 levels by 2010 and sets out a number of proposals to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Spatial planning has a major and positive contribution to make in meeting this challenge by promoting policies which reduce the threat of climate change through:

- promoting the highest standards of resource and energy efficiency in new development so as to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions arising from construction and use
- requiring land-use patterns that reduce the need and the propensity to travel by car
- vigorously promoting small and large scale renewable energy projects
- restricting development which has a major negative impact on CO₂ emissions
- adapting to the harmful impacts of climate change

This is a good policy and starting point. The question now is whether this will guide other policies and practice or be undermined by business as usual development and resource use.

GROWTH WITHIN LIMITS

The scale of projected growth is one of the main reasons why it will be such a challenge for development in the North East to be truly sustainable. The region's population, close to 2.5 million is expected to reach 2.64 million by 2028 (RSS p8). The area suffers from high levels of social and economic deprivation and dereliction and there are a number of key challenges identified within the RSS to tackle this.

Road traffic is already a serious burden across the range of cities and towns, creating problems of pollution, noise and congestion which depress local economies and erode peoples' quality of life.

In principle there may well be cases where urban extensions are justified and will present exciting opportunities to build in more sustainable patterns of living from the start. It is doubtful however that basing them around roads, superstores and airports will achieve such an aim.

It is too early to tell what the effect will be on key environmental limits such as climate emissions and biodiversity.

THE APPROACH TO TRANSPORT

Whatever debates may rage about the correct scale of housing growth across the region it is clear that transport is a key to determining whether or not growth is within environmental limits – and particularly the need to get carbon emissions on a sustained downward path.

The main contradiction of all is the support the draft RSS gives to air travel – the most polluting form of transport. The excuse for this is that Government policy requires it, but Government policy also requires the NE to implement sustainable development, and if the two policies are in conflict the region's planners should not be afraid to point this out.

The RSS makes reference to transport in the introduction to 'Theme 3D: improving connectivity & accessibility with and beyond the region' (p174), highlighting this as one of four key themes to delivering 'renaissance' in the NE. The introduction also indicates that "this has to be achieved within the principles of sustainable development". Further to this the RSS (p177) paragraph 3.217 recognises that "nationally transport is one of the main producers of greenhouse gases contributing to climate change". Yet paragraph 3.218 promotes the airports as 'International Gateways' and significant infrastructure developments to aid airport growth. The RSS also refers to The NWGS as recognising airports are essential as key economic drivers and to *The Future of Air Transport White Paper*, indicating that impacts, in relation to significant growth of the Region's airports, will be limited (3.220).

The estimated growth of the region's airports can be found in Policies 19 and 21 showing that by 2016 passenger numbers are expected to increase to 10 million a year (Newcastle International Airport) and to 3 million a year (Durham Tees Valley Airport). This is far higher than the Government's Aviation White Paper, providing a strategic framework for airport development to 2030 in support of expansion from about 4 to 10 million passengers by 2030.

CITY REGION DEVELOPMENT

Tees Valley: The heavy industrial sites, particularly along the River Tees and the Wilton Centre are identified as securing long term economic benefits with a large land allocation for future development and served by the 2nd largest port in the UK: Teesport. The area is identified as having capacity to develop renewable energy technologies working in partnership with New & Renewable Energy Centre (NaREC) in Northumberland and there are proposals to build a £225 million deep sea container terminal, currently championed by new NE Minister Nick Brown, MP. Despite challenges to the contrary by NGO's attending the RSS public hearings there are to be no green belt designations in the Tees Valley as designated strategic gaps are considered sufficient to prevent urban coalescence. Proposals for the Wynyard & NetPark 'prestige employment sites' have been adjusted within the RSS to support 'appropriate' development although we expect that those with interests in developing these greenfield sites will seek to contest this decision.

Tyne & Wear: Newcastle is recognised as a regional centre for employment, leisure, health and other facilities with a net inflow of 57,000 commuters per day (p43). Durham city is considered a major asset however the redundant coalfield areas display particular deprivation problems (2.110). Public transport use is estimated as 30% of journeys into Newcastle but generally public transport elsewhere is low. Congestion is cited as a priority with justification for a number of road growth developments including a 2nd Tyne Tunnel. The RSS identifies key development opportunities along the River Tyne including prestige

employment sites however this poses additional problems with connectivity and the river is cited as a 'barrier' to the success of such development. Needless to say this is used to justify a new River Tyne crossing. Elsewhere, 55 hectares of undeveloped land are allocated to Newcastle International Airport to provide for the estimated increase in passenger numbers.

Rural areas: One of the regions major assets is the natural beauty of the NE landscape. The RSS states that the NE has some of the most remote and least populated areas in England and the lowest proportion of people living in rural areas of any English region (p74). There is a problem with second and holiday ownership and a decline in fishing and farming. The RSS seeks to develop economic growth and protect the NE environment through diversification of agriculture, tourism and renewables (P8 p80).

RENEWABLE ENERGY and WASTE

The RSS states that the region needs to generate 40% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2060 to achieve a national commitment to the Energy White Paper. Policy 40 (p153) proposes to increase electricity consumption from renewables by at least 10% by 2010 and a further 20% by 2020. This is another gain we managed to make from our RSS involvement. On waste policies the RSS (p162-173) recognises how the increasing amount of waste produced is having a negative effect on the environment, society and the economy. The need to address the problems are a priority of the Assembly which aims to:

- promote a fundamental change in the way waste is dealt with
- minimise the quantities of waste produced
- increase awareness, influence attitudes and promote waste minimisation reuse and recycling
- promote the development of new markets for recycled products
- ensure that the region is served by a reliable, integrated waste management infrastructure that serves the collection, management and disposal requirements of all waste producers
- seek that waste be disposed of in one of the nearest appropriate installations (amendment yet to be included in current RSS)
- ensure that communities take more responsibility for their own waste (amendment yet to be included in current RSS)
- reduce the environmental impact of waste management practices

The RSS further stresses that the need for new facilities is urgent for the waste industry and local authorities to develop and that Local Development Frameworks will be responsible for such developments within the key principles of Policy 46 Sustainable Waste Management as set out above. However, there is a reference that although the RSS recognise that legislation requires a reduction in landfill there will be a need for this throughout the RSS period to deal with residual waste after treatment (p166). The RSS states also that high temperature incineration will be required to deal with the Regions hazardous waste due to the Landfill Directive 2004 banning hazardous waste to landfill.