

SOUTH WEST REGIONAL MEETING

13TH MAY 2006

WORKSHOP 1 – REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY

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Attendees from Cheltenham, Cirencester, South Gloucestershire, Bristol, Bath, North Somerset, West Dorset, Exeter and Falmouth.

INTRODUCTION

For some participants Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) was entirely new so Mike began with an outline of the new planning system and a brief sketch of the complex machinery of regional governance:

[South West Regional Assembly](#)

This is a representative body, made up of about 75 councillors from around the region and about 35 [Social, Economic and Environmental Partners](#) (SEEPs). The latter group includes three from environmental groups, elected and supported by the [Regional Environment Network](#) .

The three environmental partners are presently Cate Mack, Howard Thomas and Mark Robins. Mike considered that our three partners had far more influence than their small number might suggest, partly because the SEEP's worked well as a group and were able to take more of a regional overview, while councillors tended to be restricted to party and local perspectives.

The Assembly is the Regional Planning Body and responsible for drawing up the RSS. It has a small officer group, and some of the task of Spatial Planning is "sub-contracted" to local authority planners.

[Regional Development Agency \(RDA\)](#)

The economic development body for the region, responsible to the Department of Trade and Industry. The RDA draws up the [Regional Economic Strategy](#) (RES) and has significant funding. The RES and the RSS are meant to be consistent and support each other.

[Government Office for the South West \(GOSW\)](#)

The Government Office is made up of civil servants representing the various government departments, and its main task is to oversee the implementation of government policy at regional level in a "joined up" way. It has a very strong behind-the-scenes influence on the RSS.

MAIN POINTS ABOUT RSS

- **It's the main statutory planning document for the whole region**

Under the new planning system introduced in 2004 RSS replaces county and unitary structure plans, and as such it dictates in broad terms how much of what kind of development happens where. It will specify, for example, housing numbers down to district level. It includes chapters on transport, energy, minerals and waste.

The new system has meant a loss of democratic control, with the transfer of powers to a more remote and unelected body. There is particular concern about planning at the “sub-regional” level where “partnerships” of selected councillors and business leaders dominate.

- **RSS can be “a force for good”**

- for instance in specifying a strong regional target for reducing carbon emissions, and requiring new development to have on-site renewable generation. It can thus take the lead in making developments more sustainable despite weak building regulations. The sights are being set higher all the time and the draft policy for Milton Keynes now specifies “zero carbon” development.

- **The Draft South West RSS has a radical approach**

It seeks to reduce the region’s ecological footprint and in principle sets stringent tests of sustainability on new development...

- **There is a problem of consistency**

... but that’s only the theory. In practice RSS still advocates expanding roads, airports, “waste to energy”, huge outputs from quarries etc. It is also contradictory at a very basic level: for example it aims to reduce the economic inequalities between the major urban growth centres in the north of the region and the more remote and rural peninsula, but at the same time to accelerate growth in the more prosperous areas.

- **It has a tendency to “motherhood and apple pie” policies**

It continually confuses aspiration with reality. It suggests the fundamental problems of unsustainable development will be overcome by such measures as a “step change” in public transport provision, reducing the distances travelled between home and work, and reducing economic inequality. It has no mechanism for making these things happen. Some of these policy aspirations have been around for 40 years and are no nearer being realised.

- **RSS is limited in what it can achieve**

- partly because of prevailing economic forces which it can do little about, partly because the Assembly’s hands are tied by government policy such as the Air Transport White Paper. The powerful “hidden hands” of the Treasury, Department for Communities and Local Government (what used to be John Prescott’s ODPM) and GOSW often determine what can and can’t be said in RSS.

- **Some policies are poorly justified**

- particularly the proposed locations of new “urban extensions”. Policies can be the result of horse trading between local councils and the political pressures they are subject to, rather than an objective and even-handed appraisal of different options.

- **RSS concentrates development everywhere and prioritises everything**

Every local authority wants a piece of the action!

THE PROCESS OF ADOPTING RSS

The RSS has been under development for a couple of years. The [Draft RSS](#) is now on the Assembly's website and it will be published in June. There will then be a three month consultation period.

Very few paper copies of the Draft RSS will be available, although you will be able to buy them at £30 a go. The Assembly will put the documents on its website and make CD versions available free. It was pointed out that this breaches equal opportunity principles if the Assembly is assuming you need a computer in order to engage in the process.

The government will appoint an independent panel to run an Examination in Public (EiP) in Exeter early in 2007. The EiP is the last chance for interested groups to challenge RSS policies and try to get them changed.

There is no automatic right to be heard at the EiP. "Stakeholders" are invited on the basis of their formal submissions to the consultation.

So long as we do the work and put in a decent submission during the June-August consultation period, Friends of the Earth is likely to get a seat for at least some of the sessions.

We will also be working closely with our colleagues in the Regional Environment Network and aiming for a joint response on some issues.

The Draft RSS has been subject to a [Strategic Sustainability Assessment](#), which is a requirement of both [government planning policy](#) and European law (the "[SEA Directive](#)"). This Assessment is helpful in highlighting some of the shortcomings in RSS policy and is an authoritative source that we can quote.

WHAT WE NEED TO DO

The workshop moved on to discuss what our headline policy issues should be and how to tackle our response to the draft RSS.

Agreed that using climate as a positive focus tied in with our campaign priorities and gives us a good strategic handle on the RSS. It would be good to have developers arguing alongside us for zero carbon new build.

Most discussion was about new housing. Points made:

- The huge scale of the proposals, especially in the growth areas, is not widely appreciated. This applies even to the councillors voting on their authorities' input to the RSS
- The rapid growth is dictated by bullish economic forecasts from central government. They may be hopelessly unrealistic (e.g. reliant on an oil price of \$30 a barrel) but are not open to direct challenge through the RSS. At best we can argue that RSS should be resilient to the "unexpected"

- There is no national spatial strategy, so regions are competing with one another and the greatest pressure is exerted on those areas that have experienced the most development in the recent past
- Draft RSS and RES both endorse “growth within environmental limits” but with little appreciation as yet of what this means in practice. Part of the problem is that the limits can only be specified at local level
- There is a real problem of affordable homes, especially in areas with high second home ownership. Government policy ([the "Barker Report"](#)) puts the emphasis on simply building more houses as a means of bringing the price down.
- Government and the developers seek to portray objectors to housing growth as “just NIMBY’s” denying housing to those in real need. We should be alert to this and try to discuss our response with social housing providers and campaigns such as Shelter.
- Housing forecasts are very technically driven and beyond our capacity to challenge on this level. Housebuilders have huge resources to crunch numbers, pay for armies of consultants etc.
- At a political level we can however raise the temperature by pointing to the local impacts of the proposals in RSS
- Friends of the Earth’s [RSS Policy Brief](#) argues that Green Belts should stay in place; there was some doubt that this was altogether a realistic stance. Green belts are turning into a load of paddocks, but it was pointed out that their function is to restrain car-based sprawl, rather than protect land of intrinsic value.

HOW WE CAN WORK ON RSS

Mike will work with England team colleagues and in close liaison with the Regional Environment Network to draft a South West Friends of the Earth response

Mike will distil an extract of the best/worst bits of the draft RSS (it’s 205 pages long!) together with some initial comments for early circulation to local groups.

Comments on the South West FOE response, or offers to take on a particular area of work, are welcome at any stage. The most important way in which local groups can comment is in respect of their own areas. The draft RSS contains policy proposals for every part of the region.

Local Groups can of course send in their own responses to the areas that most affect them, and Mike recommends that all groups should consider doing this. It would be helpful for the South West office to see Local Groups’ responses (draft or final) at the earliest opportunity so that we can make sure we are supporting each others’ points.

To help local groups respond, Mike has made some CD’s containing the Draft RSS, the Sustainability Appraisal, and Friends of the Earth’s RSS policy brief. Please contact the South West Office if you would like one or more of these.

Most people haven’t a clue that the RSS exists, let alone how it might affect them. It was agreed that letters to local papers would help spread awareness and debate, and

Mike will work to produce some key facts and quotes that local group members can adapt for writing to their own local papers.

The four “West of England” (used to be Avon) groups are working together on a “Save our Green Belt” campaign, led by [South Gloucestershire Friends of the Earth](#). They are happy to offer materials or advice to others to develop similar campaigns.

Main links used in text:

South West Regional Assembly: <http://www.southwest-ra.gov.uk/index.html>

Regional Environment Network: <http://www.swenvo.org.uk/SWREN/SWRENindex.asp>

Regional Development Agency (RDA): <http://www.southwestrda.org.uk/>

Government Office for the South West (GOSW): <http://www.gosw.gov.uk/gosw/>

Draft RSS:

<http://www.southwest-ra.gov.uk/media/SWRA/RSS%20Documents/Final%20Draft/draftrssfull.pdf>

Strategic Sustainability Assessment:

<http://www.southwest-ra.gov.uk/media/SWRA/RSS%20Documents/Final%20Draft/ssamainreport1.pdf>

RSS Policy Brief: http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/guides/rss_2nd_edition.pdf