

The Barker Review of Land Use Planning: Final Report Response by the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire

Introduction

1. The Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH) is a voluntary working partnership of eleven local authorities stretching from the New Forest to East Hampshire. It was formed in 2003 in response to evidence that the overall economic performance of the urban authorities of south Hampshire (Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth and Southampton) was significantly lower than the remainder of South East England. Following government demands that the wider south Hampshire area should accommodate an additional 80,000 homes by 2026, the core authorities joined forces with East Hampshire, New Forest, Test Valley and Winchester as well as involving Hampshire County Council as a then strategic planning authority.
2. Working together and guided by the Leaders of all eleven local authorities, PUSH is driven by the desire to ensure that the necessary economic growth in south Hampshire to allow quality jobs and a good standard of living is matched by the need to secure significant investment in infrastructure for government and developers to bring about a bright present and an even brighter future for all its residents - existing or to come.
3. PUSH therefore has a considerable interest in Kate Barker's recommendations on the future of the land use planning system. Reflecting the nature of PUSH, this response concentrates on those recommendations which relate to planning at sub-regional level, leaving constituent PUSH authorities to comment on more detailed matters.
4. In summary, the proposed PUSH response is as follows:-
 - To welcome Kate Barker's support for the plan-led approach and the role of the planning system in balancing social, economic and environmental goals, and her recommendations for improved resourcing of the system;
 - To welcome her call for reduced central Government control of the system;
 - To welcome in principle her recommendations to streamline planning processes subject to clarification of how these would operate in practice;
 - To reserve judgement on the proposal for a Planning Commission to take decisions on major infrastructure projects until more details of this are available;
 - To welcome her calls for stronger links between plans and infrastructure provision;
 - To welcome her endorsement of the concept of green wedges which are essentially the same as South Hampshire's Strategic Gaps;
 - To endorse the recommendation that local authorities should work together on policy formulation and decision making but that the Government could usefully consider the findings of the joint project between the Hampshire planning authorities and the IDA on how the obstacles to this can be overcome;
 - There is a case for enabling a stronger role for sub-regional policy formulation.

Commentary on Barker's Recommendations

5. Kate Barker has recognised the importance of a plan-led approach and is supportive of the role that the planning system performs in balancing social, economic and environmental goals. Her recommendations include enhancing the skills and status of professionals and elected Members, and proposals to improve the resourcing of the system, including making more resources available to the Planning Inspectorate. This would be achieved by more funding, more support staff and by introducing a mediation service to act as an alternative dispute mechanism. High design standards are recognised as being important. These recommendations are to be welcomed.
6. Kate Barker has clearly taken on board representations which have pointed to the way Government directs the system and involves itself in decision making. The recommendations seek to remove excessive control by Government and to provide a less centrally-regulated regime. They include:
 - (i) an end to the practice where more than one Minister is required to decide an application;
 - (ii) a limitation on ministerial decisions to national or more than local issues;
 - (iii) a reduction in the number of applications referred to a minister or 'called in' by a minister;
 - (iv) a substantial reduction in the volume of Planning Policy Guidance; and
 - (v) time limits for ministerial decision making.

These recommendations are to be welcomed and should remove unnecessary restrictions on local planning authorities; it would be helpful if ministers sought to limit the creation of additional restrictions flowing from European legislation.

7. Many recommendations are concerned with the detail of the planning process, at both national and local level. These are designed to streamline processes to increase speed in plan and decision making and to provide greater clarity and certainty in advice and guidance. They include:
 - (i) streamlining local development scheme processes;
 - (ii) changing the community involvement process by removing the need for examination of the process itself;
 - (iii) speeding up arrangements for producing supplementary planning documents;
 - (iv) removing the requirement for the plan process to restart if challenged whilst in progress; and
 - (v) speeding up the final stages of planning decisions by, inter alia, using a tariff system to secure developer contributions.
8. On the face of it, much of this list is to be welcomed in principle but some recommendations are too lacking in detail to provide any real indication of how they might work in practice. Interestingly, the recommendation on tariffs is at variance with the Government's seeming intent to proceed with a Planning Gain Supplement.

9. There is a suggestion that businesses should make use of 'direct community goodwill payments' voluntarily as this "may help to facilitate development". In practice, this provision already exists through the planning obligations system. It is largely a matter of opinion whether there is a positive effect or whether it speeds the process.
10. To improve the decision-making framework for major infrastructure projects, such as energy, transport, and waste, a new body called a 'Planning Commission' is proposed. This would be an independent 'expert' body with streamlined public enquiry powers. Its decisions would be based on national statements of strategic objectives prepared by ministers, and on other plans and local considerations.
11. This proposal at first sight may appear to offer advantages in terms of quality of decision making and efficiency. However, it will be important to maintain an opportunity for local people to have their say, and much will depend on precisely how consultation or a fast track inquiry process would be conducted. The Barker report gives little insight beyond a statement that it would be "*fair, transparent and even-handed*".
12. Barker has made a number of recommendations which seek to give more weight to economic benefits and make planning more responsive to economic circumstances. It recommends updating national policy on economic development to strengthen the consideration given to economic factors and proposes greater integration of Regional Spatial Strategies and Regional Economic Strategies. It also calls for a stronger link between plans and infrastructure provision to inspire confidence that large developments will have the necessary infrastructure in place.
13. A review of Green Belt boundaries is proposed, alongside recommendations that the quality of other green space should be protected and enhanced. The 'green wedge' approach is commended by her. The latter is welcomed as South Hampshire's Strategic Gaps are essentially green wedges in nature. A green wedge approach produces an urban environment with greater access for all to usable green space.
14. The report recommends that local authorities should be encouraged to work together on Local Development Frameworks and decision making where there are issues that cross administrative boundaries. This recommendation is welcomed and South Hampshire local authorities have already begun to take this forward, through voluntary partnership arrangements. However, some legal and administrative procedures create obstacles to joint working and the production of joint documents. A joint project between the Hampshire planning authorities and the IDA investigating how these obstacles can be overcome is due to be completed in March; the Government could usefully study the conclusions of that joint project when considering this Barker recommendation.
15. Allied to this is the Report's recommendation that consideration should be given to applying strategic decision-making powers "*elsewhere*". There is a case for making changes to planning procedures and practices to provide a stronger role for sub-regional policy formulation; this would certainly be preferable to increased decision-making at regional level.