

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

PLANNING and TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY BOARD

22 October 2007

Report of the Director of Planning Transport and Leisure

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision

1 SOUTH EAST PLAN, EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC PANEL REPORT

Summary

This report provides an overall appraisal of the recently published report of the independent Panel following the Public Examination of the South East Plan prepared by the South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA).

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 On the 29 August the Government office for the South East (GOSE) published the Panel's Report following an Examination in Public into the South East Plan which was held between November 2006 and March of this year. GOSE will now prepare the proposed changes to the Plan for a twelve week consultation envisaged to take place in the early in 2008 taking the Panel's report and other factors into account.
- 1.1.2 The publication of the Panel's report in itself is not subject to any formal consultation process. However, no doubt the opportunity will be taken by some to make representations to GOSE during this period. SEERA are planning to formulate some views and provide some updated work to GOSE through the meeting of the Regional Planning Committee on the 26 September and the Assembly Plenary meeting on the 14 November.

1.2 Spatial Strategy

- 1.2.1 The Panel has found the South East Plan to be generally sound although they have moved to bring greater clarity to aspects of strategy and in particular have made some clear recommendations on overall housing provision and location. On the latter point they make it clear that if their recommendations on overall housing provision are taken on board in the final Plan it will satisfy the requirements of prevailing Government policy at the time of the Panel's deliberations.
- 1.2.2 The Panel has accepted almost all the approach to sub-regional geography and strategy for the various sub-regions as identified in the draft Plan. Support is given to the "sharper focus" approach of the Plan which the Panel take further by identifying specific locations for major development and recommending that the

Plan should make it clear that the identified regional hubs are expected to be a focus for growth, which in part explains some of the increase in the housing numbers proposed for Kent (see below).

- 1.2.3 In terms of housing distribution the Panel concluded that the main change should be to increase provision and provide a clearer focus on the economically buoyant parts of the region described in the Regional Economic Strategy as the Inner South-East. It is recommended that approximately 47% of all new housing should be built in these parts of the region over the next 20 years with significant increases in Central Oxfordshire, the London Fringe and the Western Corridor/Blackwater Valley.
- 1.2.4 The Panel has chosen to identify where additional housing could be provided through major developments post 2016. This would include six Strategic Development Areas (SDAs) each to accommodate a minimum of 4-5,000 new homes. Two of these are already proposed in the Plan as part of South Hampshire's sub-regional strategy; two are focussed on the work in Milton Keynes and in Aylesbury Vale sub-regional strategy and two are new SDAs at South Oxford and South Reading.
- 1.2.5 The Panel has endorsed Green Belt policy as a central plank of the spatial strategy but went on to propose reviews of the green belt in Surrey (particularly at Woking, Guildford and possibly Redhill/Reigate) and in Oxfordshire. Kent has not been specifically mentioned in this context. However, the proposed housing increases put forward for Tunbridge Wells (see below) will need to be examined in terms of the possible impacts on the green belt during LDF work.
- 1.2.6 On employment land the Panel concluded that the draft Plan did not go far enough and has recommended an early partial review in order to specify more robustly the types of employment needed for different parts of the region and to identify strategic employment sites. This reflected a concern held by the Panel that there was a degree of inconsistency between the Regional Economic Strategy and the South East Plan and in part explains the approach to increasing overall housing numbers to support a 3% GVA growth aspiration, with most of the additional housing provision directed to the areas of the greatest economic potential.

1.3 Infrastructure

- 1.3.1 The Panel recognised the importance of the Implementation Plan allied to the SE Plan but would not go so far as to draw it into the main statutory Plan itself. They saw it as a useful tool to be updated as planning at the local level progresses. However, the Panel did not agree that housing levels should be made contingent upon the delivery of particular pieces of infrastructure. Instead the Panel recommends that policy references should reinforce the importance of timely delivery of infrastructure through influencing mainstream funding and in bringing forward the regional infrastructure fund.

- 1.3.2 At the same time the Panel made an important conclusion that not enough long term capital and revenue growth was being given to the region bearing in mind the growth expectations that are envisaged and the current and expected level of public investment required.

1.4 Strategic Gaps

- 1.4.1 The Panel has very helpfully endorsed the approach to Strategic Gap policy that has generally been promoted in Kent and has particular relevance to the approach we have adopted in Tonbridge and Malling. It has done this by recognising the function of Strategic Gaps in shaping urban areas and has followed a more tailored approach, saying that their definition should be through Local Development Frameworks against criteria in the South East Plan. This is to be welcomed and if the approach survives Government scrutiny then it will be a useful tool in defending the most important areas of settlement separation in the borough which the Council has sought to uphold.

1.5 Housing Provision and Distribution

- 1.5.1 The Panel has recommended a 10% overall increase in housing provision for the region from 28,900 to 32,000 dwellings per annum which is equivalent to an increase from 578,000 to 640,000 over the Plan period (2006-2026). Although this is significant it is some way short of alternative quantities put forward by the South East of England Development Agency (36,000) and the Housebuilders' Federation (40,000).
- 1.5.2 Importantly the figure of 32,000 dwellings per annum is based upon long-term 10 year migration trends which the Panel felt to be the most robust approach with less volatility. The recommended figure is, in the Panel's view, a better reflection of the demographic and economic needs of the region and interestingly the Panel has not supported the Government's argument that more housing overall will help to address market affordability, making it clear that this was not a determining factor in their conclusions.
- 1.5.3 For the Kent and Medway area as a whole the Panel's recommendation is that housing provision should be increased from 6,100 per annum to 6,579 per annum resulting in an increase from 122,000 to 131,580 dwellings over the Plan period. This increase of 479 dwellings per annum represents an increase of 7.8% which is lower than the rate of increase put forward across the region and significantly lower than in some parts to the west (for example Berkshire is recommended for a 29% uplift). It is apparent that the Panel found a good deal of confidence in the technical evidence provided to the Public Examination for Kent which in turn had been considered and channelled through a number of very constructive member level working groups in the sub-regions across the county.
- 1.5.4 The key changes recommended by the Panel include an additional 1,880 dwellings at Maidstone commensurate with its new growth point status and an increase of 2,000 dwellings at Dover. The Panel has also made changes at

Thanet (+ 1,000) in the light of the adopted housing quantities in the Kent and Medway Structure Plan and in part this is true in Swale where there is a proposed increase also of 1,000 dwellings. These changes were largely expected and for the most part were conceded by Kent County Council during the Public Examination.

- 1.5.5 In addition to these changes, a number of other proposed increases have been put forward by the Panel. At Canterbury an additional 2,000 dwellings are proposed. This is justified by the regional hub status of the City and in recognition of the labour supply demands of the district. For Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge and Malling increases of 1,000 and 500 dwellings respectively are proposed. Again, this reflects the hub status of Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells. At Sevenoaks an increase of 200 dwellings over the Plan period is proposed. These cross county housing provision figures are summarised in the attached **Annex 1**.
- 1.5.6 The Land supply situation in the Borough as summarised in our recently adopted LDF Core Strategy is adequate to deal with the level of increase over the Plan period that has been put forward by the Panel. This is due to the availability of key strategic sites that are now coming on stream in the northern part of the Borough and the prospects for development in Tonbridge Town Centre. The point must not be forgotten, however, that beyond these development opportunities the supply of land in the long term is unlikely to be sufficient to sustain past or present levels of development due to the high degree of planning restraint in the Borough. It is also important to say that investment in infrastructure will be critical in maintaining and accommodating development activity. This applies across the Borough but will be particularly important if Tonbridge Town Centre is to be successfully regenerated and fully play its role as a 'hub' as envisaged by the Panel.
- 1.5.7 Overall on housing, the Panel report and in particular the technical arguments on which it was based apparently make it quite challenging for Government to depart significantly from the recommendations put forward without a considerable change in the evidence base and sustainability testing. It does not however prevent an early review of the Plan in terms of housing provision if it is felt by Government that the outcome of the current Plan does not meet Government aspirations on housing development that have been expressed far more recently, particularly in the Housing Green Paper which has been reported to Members recently through the Strategic Housing Advisory Board.

1.6 Legal Implications

- 1.6.1 The SE Plan when adopted will form part of the Development Plan and will be an important material consideration in the determination of planning applications and in the preparation of future Development Plan Documents as part of the Council's LDF.

1.7 Risk Assessment

- 1.7.1 The provisions of the SE Plan clearly have wide ranging implications for the future of development policy in the Borough and it is therefore important for the Council, together with other authorities in the area and partners to formulate appropriate responses at the time of the formal consultation next year.

1.8 Financial Implications

- 1.8.1 There are no financial implications directly relating from this report.

1.9 Recommendations

- 1.9.1 The Board is asked **TO NOTE** the key recommendations for the SE Plan in the Panel's Report and **ENDORSE** the commentary made in this report.
- 1.9.2 A further report **BE MADE** on the publication of the Governments response to the Panel's report which is due for formal consultation in the New Year.

Background papers:

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South East Plan Panel's Report – August 2007

Steve Humphrey

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