

Strategic and Regional Planning

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Town and Country Planning Association has recognised the need for effective strategic planning for over 50 years. Today, the TCPA believes that effective strategic planning is needed more than ever before – at UK, national, regional, and sub-regional levels.
- 1.2 Strategic planning is an important activity at various spatial levels – UK-wide, national, regional, and sub-regional – and is evolving in different ways in the various nations and regions of the UK. In addition, strategic planning is increasingly becoming more comprehensive and inclusive, and it is no longer possible or desirable to separate out land use planning from other associated strategic activities and systems of implementation. Furthermore, the design and operation of strategic planning in the nations and regions of the UK is increasingly influenced by, and in turn influences, a range of European Union policies and initiatives, such as the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and the regional programmes supported by the Structural Funds.
- 1.3 Thus the TCPA sees strategic and regional planning as an essential tool for guiding development, land use change, and a wide range of other activities at the level of relatively large areas that have some clear socio-economic, cultural, or ecological identity. This approach recognises that major developments will influence living and working conditions well beyond the boundaries of any single locality or local administration. A strategic plan should develop understanding and vision across a whole range of social, environmental, and economic issues that go far beyond the considerations of conventional land use planning, taking a comprehensive and integrated approach over long time horizons. By doing this, the aim is to ensure effective and co-ordinated thinking and action across the full range of sectoral and departmental concerns.

2 The Case for Strategic Planning

- 2.1 As stated in the 1993 report of the TCPA's Strategic Planning Working Group,¹ the British planning system which has been in place since the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act has proved remarkably successful when dealing with purely local issues. However, many decisions which affect our lives are determined not at the local level, but regionally or nationally. The TCPA has long supported the introduction of stronger strategic planning, which would help bridge this gap and co-ordinate the planning of major developments.
- 2.2 A number of parallel policy developments in the nations and regions of the UK have increased the emphasis placed on strategic planning. In Scotland a national planning framework is now proposed which would set a national spatial context for the preparation of strategic development plans in the metropolitan regions and for development plans in other areas. In Wales a similar process is under way, with the intention of establishing a National Spatial Planning Framework by March 2003; while in Northern Ireland a province-wide strategy has recently been published.
- 2.3 In England, a spatial development strategy for Greater London is currently in preparation, while in the regions outwith London a range of strategic plans exist or are in preparation. A problem evident in many of the English regions is that there are substantial actual or potential overlaps or gaps between the various regional strategies and plans (covering topics as diverse as land use, economic development, transport, culture, minerals extraction, etc.), with an accompanying risk of a lack of coherence and the presence of inconsistencies between plans. In some regions

considerable efforts have been made to address this issue through the establishment of, for example, an Integrated Regional Strategy in the East Midlands, the carefully managed parallel development of land use, transport, and economic development strategies in Yorkshire, or the use of common sub-regions for all strategic planning purposes in the North East. The requirement that regional planning guidance should provide a spatial strategy for a region, together with the introduction of overarching regional sustainable development frameworks, has helped to provide greater coherence. The replacement of regional planning guidance (RPG) by regional spatial strategies (RSSs) in the English regions is to be welcomed.

- 2.4 The case for strategic planning and implementation at national, regional, and sub-regional levels is broadly the same: the strategic approach provides coherence and a degree of certainty both in terms of the overall vision for a territory and through the establishment of an integrated programme of implementation across all relevant sectors and activities. Integrated governance is often difficult to design or deliver at a UK scale, but is a central component of comprehensive planning and implementation at the level of the individual nation or region.

3 The Characteristics of Strategic Planning

- 3.1 Planning at the strategic level allows land use, economic, social, environmental, and other issues that transcend the locality to be debated in terms of the broader forces that will largely shape them, thus permitting more appropriate and practical solutions to be found.
- 3.2 In terms of the most basic characteristics, the TCPA believes that strategic planning should be:
- visionary as well as practical;
 - aimed at long-term viability in terms of 'sustainable development' criteria;
 - prescriptive, not solely informative;
 - binding, not just advisory;
 - a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches;
 - spatial, relating to specific locations;
 - sectoral, relating to specific sectors and areas of activity;
 - achievable, in terms of resources and processes of implementation;
 - well founded in terms of research and understanding;
 - comprehensive in terms of the range of coverage, but not too detailed;
 - consistent in content and application;
 - open and accessible, with wide consultation, public participation, and direct involvement of the stakeholders;
 - cyclical, through monitoring and review;
 - medium and long term in timescale; and
 - accountable to an elected authority, assembly, or parliament at national/regional level.
- 3.3 The TCPA also argues that, at the implementation level, a strategic plan should be area and subject specific, indicating (short of identifying individual sites or detailed actions) the distribution of new development and the areas and sectors to which particular policies or standards will apply. A set of general statements, with little or no reference to localities or specific actions, will not suffice. Without clear guidance on what is to happen in specific areas and sectors of activity, government agencies, local authorities, the private sector, and other stakeholders will simply go their own way. This suggests that in some areas it will be necessary to produce sub-regional plans and strategies.
- 3.4 Moreover, it is critical for effective implementation that strategic planning must have continuity, both political and financial, in terms of the main objectives. The political and administrative arrangements for strategic planning must therefore be designed to ensure that a strategy is seen through to completion; this implies the presence of some form of elected authority, assembly, or parliament at national or regional level. Such arrangements now exist in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Greater London, and are proposed for the English regions outwith London.
- 3.5 Regional and strategic plans should not, of course, be prepared or implemented in isolation. The policies and major development proposals they contain must relate to and be consistent with UK, European, and international objectives. However, it should be acknowledged that from time to time there will be circumstances when a particular territorial strategic plan may

vary from higher-level objectives in order to more closely reflect the priorities and programmes of an individual nation, region, or sub-region.

- 3.6** General policies applied from the top down are not always appropriate to the needs of individual areas. In that respect, there is a need for clarification in, for example, planning policy guidance (PPG) and national policy statements. Planning policy guidance notes need to be clear in identifying areas of policy where there is scope for RPG (or, in future, regional spatial strategy) to take the initiative, while RPG (or RSS) should avoid a reiteration of national policy.
- 3.7** In the English regions there is also a need to ensure a high level of consistency between the RPG (or RSS) and the full range of other regional strategic plans and processes. At present a number of informal mechanisms exist that are aimed at enhancing the co-ordination of plans, but it is not always clear how responsibility for co-ordination is exercised, especially when the primary line of accountability is upwards to Whitehall rather than within the region. Furthermore, there are real concerns about the duplication of planning processes and bureaucracies, especially in a situation in which financial and staff resources are scarce. This situation will improve following the election of regional governments and the further devolution of power.
- 3.8** Although the contexts for strategic planning in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Greater London are different in some ways from those evident in the eight English regions outwith London, a number of similarities exist in terms of the scope and content of strategic plans. One crucial difference between the various parts of the UK which now enjoy a degree of devolved government and the eight English regions is that within the devolved territories the potential for strategic coherence is far greater. Instead of having to comply with often inappropriate 'one size fits all' UK policies, strategic policies and activities in the devolved territories are better able to fit the circumstances which obtain in these areas.
- 3.9** A final point to make is that strategic planning in all of the nations and regions should be based on a collaborative approach, in which non-governmental organisations are encouraged to participate at all stages of the planning. This includes environmental organisations, the business sector, voluntary groups, and community organisations.

4 The Purposes and Roles of Strategic Plans

- 4.1** A strategic plan for future development should:
- set out guidelines for local development and change that are designed to secure conformity with sustainable development criteria;
 - provide a clear framework for future infrastructure investment, both public and private;
 - co-ordinate between sectors in terms of the scale and location of future development, and provide inter-departmental synchronisation (for example between land use, housing, transport, education, utilities, economic development, and other activities) that is frequently not possible within central government;
 - follow UK guidance for the achievement of policy objectives, but be empowered to decide on national and regional programmes and priorities without prior ministerial approval, subject only to reserve 'call-in' powers;
 - be accompanied by effective powers for implementation both through the allocation of funds to local authorities or other stakeholders for development where local design and execution is important, and through direct action in those cases where the scale or non-local nature of development makes this preferable;
 - be prepared on the basis of regular consultation with local government, community groups, voluntary bodies, business, and other interest groups to provide a means by which these varied interests can come together constructively in developing specific strategic objectives and programmes for achieving them; and
 - assess the environmental and social impacts of its policies, programmes, and specific development proposals using accepted environmental and social auditing systems, and measure the effects of policies and actions using key indicators of environmental and social change.

5 Questions of Scale

- 5.1** The present boundaries of some English regions bear little relationship to areas of common socio-economic, cultural, or ecological identity, and most of them are too large. An illustration

of this can be taken from the South West, where Tewkesbury is further from Lands End than it is from Gretna Green. Similar but less extreme anomalies occur in other regions, and in such circumstances it is difficult to frame policies that are relevant to the region as a whole.

- 5.2 The number of regions should ideally be increased, but in view of the obvious political difficulty in changing regional boundaries, the TCPA considers it essential that RPG, and eventually the more comprehensive strategic plans that the TCPA advocates, such as RSSs, should contain appropriate strategies for their sub-regions. Thus in, say, the South West there might need to be a separate strategy for Devon and Cornwall, while in the North West separate strategies may be required for Merseyside, Greater Manchester, and Cumbria. In determining the sub-regions to be used for planning purposes, the regional body should select the most suitable areas of territory and should not be constrained by the current county or unitary authority arrangements and boundaries. If the present large regions are to be retained, then there is a strong case for continuing with the present two-tier system of local government, although this should not prevent the introduction of joint authority arrangements for sub-regional planning and implementation, as currently exist in Scotland. The question of the structure of local government should be left to the region to decide and should not be dictated by central government.
- 5.3 Strategic planning is an aspect of policy and governance that is increasingly capturing public and political imagination. One of the reasons for this noticeable shift in opinion is the presence of a range of improvements that are associated with the devolution of government to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Greater London: policies are now more integrated and territory-specific than in the past, and ordinary people have a greater sense of power and the ability to directly influence policy. The lack of an effective and directly accountable system of strategic planning in the English regions outwith London will have serious consequences for the economic, social, and environmental well-being of these areas. The continuing absence of effective comprehensive strategic planning in these regions will weaken efforts to secure sustainable development, will lead to missed development opportunities in places where they should be seized, and above all, will aggravate regional inequalities.
- 5.4 The establishment of an improved model for integrated and comprehensive strategic planning in the English regions cannot, and should not, be divorced from the introduction of directly elected regional government. Substantial public support now exists in most regions for the creation of elected regional assemblies, which should be given, at least, the same powers as the National Assembly for Wales. Effective strategic planning and implementation will require region-by-region changes to the design of policy and in the pattern of public expenditure; such changes must be subject to direct political accountability. Devolution to the regions should chiefly involve the transfer of central powers to regional assemblies, including the control of quangos and non-departmental bodies operating at regional level.
- 5.5 In line with the introduction of directly elected regional assemblies in the English regions outwith London, the strengthening of the powers and responsibilities of the devolved governments in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Greater London should be undertaken. The track record of success of these governments in moving forward with integrated comprehensive strategic planning, implementation, and management is a testimony to the capability of devolved government to resolve many of the longstanding problems of fragmentation that are associated with the presence of separate policy silos in Whitehall.
- 5.6 As was argued in the *Your Place and Mine*,² the Report of the TCPA Inquiry into the Future of Planning, in the spirit of subsidiarity and in recognition of the need for greater strategic clarity in both policy and implementation, a higher degree of devolution of planning policies and procedures is needed. The TCPA believes that the measures outlined in this policy statement provide a practical basis for future progress.

Notes

1 *Strategic Planning for Regional Development*. TCPA, London, 1993

2 *Your Place and Mine: Reinventing Planning*. Report of TCPA Inquiry into the Future of Planning. TCPA, London, 1999