

Workshop Briefing: Building Communities of the Future

The ambitions of the Partnership

The Partnership is committed to planning and managing the growth in homes and jobs in order to build mixed and sustainable communities. To achieve this outcome, it is committed to:

- Accommodating the housing needs of existing and future residents, particularly for affordable units, and mitigating and overcoming the impact of the current economic recession on the delivery of new housing;
- Ensuring that new development provides a mix of uses, as appropriate, to reduce the need to travel;
- Prioritising urban regeneration and intensification;
- Securing the infrastructure investment required to support the growth of homes and jobs;
- Ensuring that all new developments address and reduce the impacts of climate change, improve and enhance the natural and built environment and support the creation of successful neighbourhoods.

The Partnership contributed to the preparation of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) and welcomes the recognition given to the economic potential of the West of England. It supports many of the principles and proposals of the draft RSS, especially its commitment to sustainable development. However, the Partnership has objected strongly to the increase in the dwelling provisions for the sub-region shown by the RSS Proposed Changes. Reasons for these objections include lack of clear justification and concerns about:

- delivery and local development capacity;
- inconsistencies between development proposals, the spatial strategy and prioritising brownfield development;
- the provision of infrastructure and the government investment required to support development; and
- the implications of higher dwelling targets for the Green Belt.

Issues and challenges

The need for more homes

1. The need for more homes in the West of England is rising. The natural increase of the population, in-migration and falling household size are driving this trend. Recent projections indicate that the rising need for more homes is likely to accelerate over the future, due to higher migration and the ageing of the population.
2. The need for more homes is also reinforced by current shortages; many households can't afford to rent or buy homes, while shortfalls in the housing supply are contributing to rising house prices and increasing affordability problems.

3. Long-term trends show an average completion rate of 3,820 dwellings per annum (1996-2008) in the West of England. Recent demographic projections, however, show the need for more dwellings, rising by up to 7,500 per annum over the next 20 years. Similarly, the requirement for affordable homes over the future has been estimated at 4,180 per annum.
4. Current planning commitments in the West of England represent the potential for an extra 31,000 dwellings. This potential supply matches about 4 years' future growth when compared with recent household projections, or about 8 years' growth when compared with the long-term dwelling completion rate for the sub-region.
5. RSS Proposed Changes require provision for some 117,350 additional dwellings in the West of England between 2006 and 2026 (or 5,850 per annum average). The Partnership has objected to this level provision owing to a range of concerns including delivery, prioritising brownfield development and safeguarding the Green Belt. There is now much uncertainty about when the RSS will be approved by the government. Currently the government is giving further consideration about whether the proposals are the most sustainable way forward for the region.

Creating balanced and sustainable communities

1. Building new homes provides the opportunity for creating balanced and sustainable new communities. Realising this opportunity has implications for the ways in which many planning issues are resolved. These range from building standards, design of development, housing affordability, tenure and size, provision for local services, amenities, jobs and the natural environment through to the accessibility of new developments to major employment locations and town centres, consistency with business location requirements and safeguarding critical environmental assets.
2. There is concern that the West of England is becoming over-developed and that continued growth threatens the natural environment of the sub-region. There is also concern about the commitment of government to supporting the investment in the new infrastructure required to address the current backlog in transport investment and support further growth.
3. These concerns have been heightened by the impacts of the recession, on the capacity of the building industry to both bring forward new development over the medium term and to contribute to investment in affordable housing and physical and social infrastructure. The recession has led to a sharp slowdown in house building and full recovery is unlikely to happen for some years. This will restrict the capacity of the development industry to contribute to infrastructure investment, especially major projects. At the same time, the prospect of increasing restrictions on public expenditure is likely to constrain significantly government investment in the infrastructure needed to support new house building and the creation of sustainable communities.
4. Further growth must be planned within a framework that ensures that development is sustainable. Short-term considerations must not lead to sub-optimal development that harms progress towards sustainable development over the long-term. The appropriate safeguards must accompany new development to ensure that complementary investment in new infrastructure is secured.

Retaining the green belt and protecting our natural environment and the countryside from development

1. Meeting the need for more housing in the West of England threatens the Green Belt and the natural environment. The urban areas of the West of England offer much opportunity for new house building through investing in renewal and intensification, improved services and open space. Many urban development opportunities benefit from existing infrastructure and facilities, proximity to much employment and potential for further economic growth. Extending development into the nearby countryside may lead to increasing travel with adverse implications for the global environment.
2. The Green Belt is making a vital contribution to containing urban growth in the West of England. It prevents the expansion of Bristol and Bath into the adjacent countryside and merging with adjacent settlements. It provides confidence about the future pattern of development across the sub-region and reinforces the need to invest in the regeneration of our towns and cities. It contributes to safeguarding the world heritage status of Bath.
3. The loss of land from the Green Belt may lead to a continuing process of erosion with perhaps further losses from time to time inevitable. The confidence of investors in urban areas would be harmed. Many of our smaller settlements would lose their identity, while urban dwellers would have greater difficulty in accessing areas of tranquil countryside.
4. Expanding the development of Bath and Bristol into the surrounding countryside may threaten a range of environmental assets. In many instances it may be possible to mitigate the effects of harm to particular locations, but adverse consequences for the natural environment may be the outcome.
5. Meeting requirements for more housing within the urban areas would create communities that benefit from existing infrastructure, good public transport and proximity to facilities. It would acknowledge the many jobs in the urban areas and, in particular, the economic success of Bath and Bristol in attracting jobs in the expanding 'knowledge economy'. Locating new housing in the urban areas, therefore, would reduce travel distances by car, contributing to minimising CO₂ emissions.