

The West of England Partnership

The Challenges of Managing Future Growth

Workshop, Friday 21st September 2007, @ Bristol

Introduction

1. The West of England Partnership (WEP) organised a highly successful workshop on Friday 21st September 2007 with local and regional public sector partners to discuss the challenges of managing future growth in the West of England sub-region. The sub-region covers the four unitary authorities of Bath & North East Somerset (BANES), Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. WEP brings together the four authorities to discuss issues of sub-regional importance where there are benefits to working together. The partnership also includes representatives of Business West (the local Chamber of Commerce), government agencies and social, economic and environmental partners.
2. The event was attended by around 80 stakeholders from the local authorities, regional government, non-departmental government agencies, sub-regional representatives of agencies and local interest groups. The stakeholders included local councillors, and senior managers and officers working in planning, transport, economic development, inward investment, housing and homelessness, the environment, waste, rural issues, education, employment and skills, business support and community development.
3. This note provides a record of the day. The presentations given at the workshop are also available on the West of England Partnership website¹.

Programme of day

Presentations

4. Councillor (Cllr) Helen Holland, Leader of Bristol City Council and Chair of the WEP, opened the workshop and welcomed attendees to the day. Cllr Holland said that the key challenge for the sub-region will be effectively managing and controlling growth over the next 10-15 years in a sustainable way that benefits all in the sub-region.
5. Simon Birch, Chief Executive of the WEP, gave a presentation on the scale of growth likely in the sub-region and the challenge in ensuring that supporting infrastructure is in place to meet this growth.
6. Barbara Davies of the WEP gave a presentation on the transport issues facing the sub-region and the strategy that has been developed in response to these issues. This included discussing work that is underway at the sub-regional level and bids being made to regional and central government to secure more resources for transport.

¹ <http://www.westofengland.org/news/default.asp?NewsId=1068&SectionId=2632&TypeId=2&RegionId=0>

7. Nick Hooper, Head of Strategic Housing at Bristol City Council, gave a presentation on the housing challenges facing the sub-region, particularly affordable housing requirements going forward.
8. David Draycott, Interim Director of West at Work, gave a presentation on the origins of the 3-year West at Work project and the strategy and partnership that has been formed to drive forward activity.
9. The last presentation was given by Scott Dickinson, Associate Director of economic development consultants SQW. SQW has been commissioned by the WEP to help prepare a sub-regional delivery plan (SRDP) for the West of England. As part of this work, SQW helped the local authorities and WEP to prepare a Programme of Development document to bid for new growth point funding from central government. The presentation provided an outline of what the SRDP and Programme of Development will contain and their purpose, and the wider context for managing growth and infrastructure delivery at the sub-regional level.

Questions to Panel

10. Following the presentations, attendees were invited to ask questions to a panel of Simon Birch, Barbara Davies, Scott Dickinson, David Draycott and Nick Hooper. A summary of the questions and answers is provided below. These are not verbatim records of the discussions. The panel members were speaking in a personal capacity.

- 1. Currently, there is no mention of the difficulties of providing employment and skills opportunities for post 16 and 18 year olds. Young people leave education at many different stages and these needs must be addressed.**

An employment and skills board and forum have been created as part of West at Work, including participation from a further education provider where these issues can be discussed. The responsibilities of all key players will be considered, especially over the coming months. Individuals aged 16-18 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and adult worklessness are key matters for improvement in the sub-region.

- 2. How will residents be incentivised to move from unemployment to employment?**

There is a need to identify both specific barriers (lack of skills, absence of affordable childcare) and soft skills (skills which need to be developed by those who have not been in employment for a long time).

The main focus will need to be targeted on sustainable and high level employment, to ensure there are opportunities beyond those offering the minimum wage. A number of additional influences including the speed of the recruitment process and benefits system (e.g. reduction in a household benefits if the grown up children of a workless household enter employment) need to be considered.

Construction skills amongst local residents is particularly important, to ensure that employment opportunities from growth in the region are created for local people. Partners will work with the construction industry to ensure the necessary skills are provided by the local population, rather than sourcing workers from outside of the region wherever possible.

3. Deprivation and worklessness cannot be signposted as easily in rural areas as in the rest of the sub region. How will this be addressed?

A rural strategy for the sub-region has been developed by WEP and partners and is currently being revised. This includes setting out the challenges and responses to rural issues in the sub-region.

4. The link between housing and worklessness is crucial. In order to provide the security needed to enter work with confidence, residents need to avoid high rents and temporary housing. How realistic is the delivery of affordable social housing in the sub-region?

Housing is not in the hands of the local authorities; they only have the power to lobby for certain outcomes. Targets have been set to reduce the number of residents living in temporary accommodation and work is being carried out to tackle homelessness. The number of households living in bed and breakfast accommodation has been reduced.

5. Will digital infrastructure be used to support growth?

No discussions have taken place yet about digital infrastructure. It can be difficult to acquire information from the private sector to ascertain if they will and can meet future demands. Further discussions are required.

6. Rail transport is fundamental for the sub region – how will the importance of its future development be reflected in sub regional plans?

A total of £70 million has been allocated to public transport improvements. The West of England Partnership will work with key partners including network rail, local authorities and providers to ensure that rail improvements are set in place.

7. Will any action be taken to tackle congestion on the South Bristol ring road?

This is currently being investigated.

8. Lessons need to be learnt from other areas across England, which have vastly improved public transport systems. How will the standards in the sub-region be increased to match these areas?

It is important to lever in as much funding as possible; last year £9 million was obtained. However, other cities in England, particularly those in the North which have much better public transport systems, were able to obtain 4 to 5 times this amount, so there are constraints.

9. How can cycling be encouraged in the sub-region?

There has been strong support from local cycle groups. The importance of cycling facilities will need to be in the mind of local developers, to ensure that necessary cycle provisions are available including lockers and showers.

10. How will the sub-regional delivery partners ensure that there are enough eligible sites for housing?

This will be determined through the planning system.

11. Will the sub-region seek funding for green infrastructure?

Yes, proposals will be put forward for new green infrastructure, funding permitting.

12. The sub-regional approach is predominately urban and top down in nature. How will the needs of rural areas be considered?

Importance is attached to empowering and aiding communities to find their own solutions. This is to ensure that the area is a desirable place to live over the next 20 years. Most of this work is likely to be led at the local level.

Afternoon workshops

11. In the afternoon, attendees were invited to participate in one of four break-out groups to discuss the following four questions:

- What are the investment priorities for delivery of infrastructure that responds to housing and employment growth?
- How well aligned are decision-making processes across organisations?
- What are the main factors affecting partners' capacity to deliver, e.g. skills for sustainable communities?
- How do you want to be kept informed/involved by WEP?

12. A summary of the issues discussed at each break-out group is provided in the following pages. The workshop closed with a short plenary of the main points from the break-out groups.

Group 1

What are the investment priorities for delivery of infrastructure that responds to housing and employment growth?

- Low carbon footprint
- Joint core strategy
- Provide infrastructure **before** development
 - all co-ordinated
 - all aspects of sustainable communities

2. How well aligned are decision-making processes across organisations?

- Four LAs must work together
- WEP can work united with main agencies
- Must be clear about priorities
- Must be realistic and opportunistic

3. What are the main factors that affect the partners' ability to deliver this infrastructure?

- Need to expand capacity of LAs.
- WEP developing specialist capacities
- Shift in entrenched attitudes
- Clarify 'transparent' accountability
- Need to improve 'professionalism'.

4. How do you want to be kept informed/ involved by WEP?

- Use simple language
- Cascade information

Group 2

1. What are the investment priorities for delivery of infrastructure that responds to housing and employment growth?

Transport

- South Bristol ring road to be completed, but...
 - Need to showcase bus routes
 - There is a lack of integration with rail
 - Disappointed with the loss of the tram system
 - Links provided are largely east to west, need more provision for north to south
- Concern that more funding to urban areas may lead to under provision in rural areas
- The train size is reduced, frequently leading to issues of overcrowding
- Bristol do not have a bus station next to the rail station
- Development piecemeal
- Transport needs to be integrated with sustainable communities, rather than being looked at in isolation

Health

- Does the current reorganisation take account of projections, and is it a sustainable service?
- Does not take into account increased population/jobs/growth
- Health services being centralised now, may need to be addressed in the future, as localised health care facilities become more important
- PCT and GP's plans for commissioning of services and specialist facilities in the future raise issues of efficiency. Local centres need to plan for this fundamental change in the future
- Need to consider population growth in the future and the location of that growth (distribution/patterns of growth, as well as overall levels)
- Accessibility to transport and to key services – outcome of LAA 'health and well-being block'
- Catching up on deficiencies that exist and are providing for future-need
- S106 will not meet unmet need – therefore consider a tariff alternative

- Elderly (paid) home care provision – more economical than dispersing to shelters and ensures balanced communities
- However, this raises the issue of single occupancy in 3 bedroom houses

Affordable housing

- Thresholds?

2. How well aligned are decision-making processes across organisations?

- This is an issue but not insurmountable
- LSPs at the local level are already beginning to work
- LAAs
 - Safer stronger communities
 - Children and young people etc
- Still some work to be done
- In potential urban extension areas, may not be anybody to consult
- Plans and strategies are not always in place, sometimes have to be re-activated

3. What are the main factors that affect the partners' ability to deliver this infrastructure?

- Don't have to work in process order, but rather work in parallel to get delivery implemented in short time frames
- Involving people/organisations at a stage when they are able to contribute. Need to understand who and when.

4. How do you want to be kept informed/ involved by WEP?

- Email
- PTEG to be involved/think-tank
- Include other sub groups
- Communication document accessible to a wide audience and to include dates

Group 3

1. What are the investment priorities for delivery of infrastructure that responds to housing and employment growth?

- Spatial priorities – Western and South Bristol
- Development must be directed to particular areas
- There is a deficit in infrastructure – flood risk assessment and landscape valuing
- Planning frameworks
- Skills of people – reducing worklessness
- Controlling/management development across the sub-region
- Need to look at why certain areas stay behind
- Urban extensions for some greenbelt land
- Delivery needs to be focused on Brownfield land before Greenfield
- Mixed views on housing with regards to:
 - Increased supply
 - Land banking
 - Strategic housing market assessment
 - Right type/mix
- Delivery on the ground – construction industry
- Transport deficit in capital and revenue
 - Cultural with regards to bus use?
 - Strategic transport authority
 - Rail funding from government?
- Bath also suffers from a housing deficit, skills shortage and increased commuting

2. How well aligned are decision-making processes across organisations?

- The strategy time frames of different organisations vary, making it difficult to work together. E.g. LTP – 5 years, Housing Association, 2 years. In order to overcome this we need to understand the key milestones in all – this could be a role for WEP
- Fundamental funding strategies and planning framework

- Co-ordinate core strategies - the corporate priorities of the four LA's need to be aligned so that they understand each others core strategies
- Communication needs to be improved, e.g. Core Strategies and flooding. LAA/MAA provide opportunities to keep in touch structurally

3. What are the main factors that affect the partners' ability to deliver this infrastructure?

- Environmental technology – whilst desirable there is a lack of installers, equipment and inspections
- A key limiting factor is a lack of the necessary labour. Arup – ASC commissioned study noted 70% of positions in the regeneration sector are unfilled
- The impact of the national review, regarding Regional assistance versus RDA
- Recruitment and retention problems for: housing and transport planners, environmental and chartered engineers
- LA-led planning decisions and accountability
- Asset backed delivery vehicle
- Must have added value on top of WEP
- Linked to activity at the delivery phase e.g. waste
- Needs reporting/safeguards to LAs
- Problem of RSS – scale
- Commercial knowledge and viability

4. How do you want to be kept informed/involved by WEP?

- WEP could play a key role in overseeing the work of the partners – WEP needs to be aware of everyone's key dates/milestones/core plans, as well as central government decisions, which could have an impact on the sub-region. This knowledge can then be used to keep all the partners informed of each other's priorities, timelines etc. Given his overseeing role the WEP would also be in a prime position to schedule meetings when there is a need for a partnership discussion, and should provide feedback to all partners following these meetings.

Group 4

1. What are the investment priorities for delivery of infrastructure that responds to housing and employment growth?

- In terms of skills and learning, it would be useful to bring together heads of successful schools and colleges to share good practice and lead growth.
- Inward investment is a key priority, prioritising those areas with the most need for employment growth.
- From the beginning, importance should be focused upon the community building and involvement.
- Keep residents informed about the delivery plan and spread positive messages about growth.
- Need to understand the dynamics behind supply and demand to allow for effective timing of development plans.
- A series of interrelated plans needs to be developed to ensure that development happens over the right time period and maintain sustainability.

2. How well aligned are decision-making processes across organisations?

- Leadership and community roles need to be maintained. The programme of development will be important in providing a key leadership role.
- There is a need for cross cutting discussion on green infrastructure.
- Focus groups with developers could be useful. They have nothing to lose but much to gain – provision of quality housing estates which could be sold at a premium.

3. What are the main factors that affect the partners' ability to deliver this infrastructure?

- Private sector skills will need to be utilised to ensure that tight deadlines are met.
- There is a key need to ensure that suitable skills are in place in the sub region, including urban designers and planners.

4. How do you want to be kept informed/ involved by WEP?

- The dynamic process of information collection will need to be reflected in the delivery of information back to stakeholders.
- The following have been suggested as suitable ways of passing on information:
 - Newsletter
 - Online forum

- Focus groups (including developers)
- Another event
- Email updates.