
EAST OF ENGLAND PLAN

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides details of the Secretary of State's proposed changes to the East of England Plan and the Council's response.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Following consultation, an Examination in Public (EIP) was held from November 2005 to March 2006 into the contents of the draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the East of England, generally called the East of England Plan. The EIP Panel's report was published in June 2006.
- 2.2 The Government has now considered its response to the Panel's report and has published a schedule of proposed changes, with reasons, for consultation; the consultation runs until 9 March 2007. A copy of the proposed changes has been placed in the Members' Library.
- 2.3 Once the responses to the consultation have been considered, it is expected that the final version of the East of England Plan will be published in mid 2007. The East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) will publish an implementation plan and monitoring framework around the same time.

3 PROPOSED CHANGES WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR ROCHFORD

- 3.1 By way of summary a briefing paper prepared by EERA is attached to this report as appendix one.

Green Belt

- 3.2 The Secretary of State has accepted the Panel's recommendation that there is no requirement for a strategic review of the Green Belt in South Essex. However, strategic reviews are to be required at several locations in the East of England and a key point about those reviews is that sufficient land be identified to meet needs not just to 2021, but to 2031 and that growth from 2021 to 2031 will be at the same rate as in the plan period.

The Coast

- 3.3 Revised Policy SS9 seeks to recognise the importance of environmental protection and enhancement balanced against the economic and social benefits to be gained from the development of coastal towns and for tourism.
- 3.4 There is a specific requirement for local development documents to investigate opportunities for managed realignment – where realignment schemes are implemented, there will be no new development.

- 3.5 A new policy on flood risk management is proposed for inclusion in the plan in accordance with the Panel's recommendations.

Thames Gateway South Essex

- 3.6 The Panel proposed a significant series of changes to the policies for Thames Gateway South Essex; these changes have been largely accepted by the Secretary of State. The growth area is to be renamed Essex Thames Gateway (ETG) and is to be focused on the Thames Gateway boundary, with the parts of Rochford, Basildon and Thurrock not in the growth area being dealt with via the generic policies in the plan.
- 3.7 Most references to transport have been removed from the ETG section of the plan with transport issues being dealt with for the whole Eastern region in the Transport chapter. A positive reference to London Southend Airport has, though, been added to new Policy ETG4.
- 3.8 New Policy ETG5 deals with employment generating development and Rochford's employment total of 3,000 has been restored to the policy (after the Panel recommended its removal), thus recognising the importance of the part of the district included in the Thames Gateway.

Employment Land

- 3.9 Amendments to Policy E2 Provision of Land for Employment, have largely been accepted by the Secretary of State. The overall jobs total has now increased from 421,000 in the draft plan to 452,000, though, as mentioned above, the total for Rochford remains unchanged, as does the overall total of 55,000 jobs for Thames Gateway South Essex.

Tourism

- 3.10 Some revisions have been proposed to Policy E13 (now E7) dealing with tourism to include references to the importance of the coast and the need to avoid any adverse impacts on sites of European importance for wildlife.

Airports

- 3.11 Policy E14 (now E8) has been revised and gives more positive support for the expansion of London Southend Airport to meet local market demand and contribute to local economic development subject to surface access and environmental safeguards.

Housing

- 3.12 The Secretary of State proposes a housing allocation of 508,000 for the region, a 30,000 increase on the figure included in the draft plan. Crucially, revised policy H1 proposes this as a minimum target to be achieved, rather than a ceiling which should not be exceeded. Furthermore, the policy

requires local authorities to exceed average annual rates for 2006-2021 if more housing can be delivered without breaching environmental limits and infrastructure constraints. In addition, it should be assumed that the annual average rate of provision should continue during the early years after 2021.

- 3.13 For Rochford, the overall level of provision of 4,600 dwellings between 2001 and 2021 has not changed. Taking account of completions between 2001-2006, the policy identifies a further 3,790 dwellings to be provided at an average annual rate of 250.

Affordable Housing

- 3.14 Revisions to Policy H3 require local authorities to set appropriate targets for affordable housing taking into account local assessment and housing market considerations, set against an overall expectation of 35% of housing being affordable in the region.

Gypsies and Travellers

- 3.15 Policy H4 is a new policy recommended by the Panel and supported by the Secretary of State, which recognises the need for an early review to ensure that local authorities can make provision for sites/pitches in their local development documents.

Transport

- 3.16 The Secretary of State has concluded that the Panel recommendation for an absolute reduction in traffic is unrealistic in the life of the plan and in any event there is no national policy to reduce traffic growth *per se*; the Government's aim is to tackle the consequences, congestion and emissions by providing people with more choice.
- 3.17 Priority areas for further studies to determine the measures needed to tackle congestion are proposed over much of the region, but overall there is very little in the transport policies likely to make a real difference in terms of investment and/or improvements to the current situation.

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR ROCHFORD

Housing Policy

- 4.1 The proposed Housing Policy H1 promotes a fundamental change in the arrangements for delivering the housing provisions for each district. Instead of the provision figure being a maximum target to achieve within the plan period, this has been changed to a minimum target, with districts being advised to exceed the target where densities can be increased, by using previously developed sites and using exception sites for affordable housing in rural areas.

- 4.2 Whilst the limitations specified in the policy may give some modest degree of comfort, there is little doubt that the focus of the East of England Plan has shifted from an 'infrastructure first' position to a 'housing at any cost' position. It was always recognised that the new East of England Plan should be infrastructure led, partly to make up for the lack of investment in the past and partly to ensure that new housing and employment did not create additional burdens in an already challenging situation.
- 4.3 However, it seems that the Government is more concerned about generating momentum for the provision of new housing than about the supporting infrastructure. Whilst it is to be welcomed that no change is proposed to the housing allocation for Rochford and, while accepting that the allocation is intended to deal with locally generated demand, the target is nevertheless a demanding one and, as Members are only too well aware, will involve the release of some Green Belt land.
- 4.4 The imposition of a minimum provision, together with a policy requirement that authorities must plan for continuous delivery over 15 years from the date of adoption inevitably means that housing must continue to be provided at the rate of 250 units per annum for at least several years after 2021. If it is assumed that adoption of Core Strategy and Allocation DPDs will not be complete until 2009-2010 and for some districts even later, then a 15 year period will run well into the mid 2020s with a significant number of houses being constructed outside the framework of adopted plans and taking no account of any analysis of need or spatial distribution.
- 4.5 If these significant reforms of the plan were not enough, there are strong indications of the need for an early review of the plan to roll forward provision to 2031. Of course, an early review of the plan may help to address any concerns about unplanned development beyond 2021, but the real agenda seems to be tied to the drive for increased housing numbers.
- 4.6 The revisions provide no meaningful information about the level of resources that will be available for the provision of improved transport infrastructure. Indeed, the Secretary of State is not supportive of a transport strategy that seeks to address the problems of congestion, but instead accepts that little can be achieved within the plan period; that is certainly the case without funding.
- 4.7 The jobs total to be delivered through the plan has not changed for the Thames Gateway districts, though the overall total for the region has increased significantly to 452,000. A key challenge for EERA and the authorities in the region will be to quantify the change in job numbers through the plan period. However, no mechanisms are proposed in the plan to achieve this monitoring and certainly from a national stand point, no robust mechanisms are available to accurately quantify the change in employment numbers. The Government must address this omission as a matter of urgency.

- 4.8 There are some positive changes to the plan (reference to London Southend Airport), which are to be welcomed, but overall the emphasis is focused on housing delivery and there does need to be more attention paid to the essential supporting infrastructure required to successfully deliver the housing and particularly the funding for transport improvements.

5 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The revisions to the plan raise concerns about the long term implications for the environment and the ability of local planning authorities to make careful, reasoned decisions about future developments that result in sustainable, integrated schemes.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The drive to see new housing development without proper regard for the adoption of a planned spatial strategy is likely to increase uncertainty and place additional burdens on local planning authorities, Rochford included, struggling to grapple with the complexities of the new planning system.

7 RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

That, subject to comments from Members, the concerns outlined in the report be conveyed to the Secretary of State as the Council's response to the consultation on the proposed changes to the East of England Plan, with specific reference to this Council's concerns that the Plan has moved away from an infrastructure to a housing led approach, and the implications for the long-term protection of the Green Belt from a minimum housing provision figure.

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Background Papers:-

East of England Plan – Secretary of State’s Proposed Changes, December 2006

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