Item 5 – Appendix G

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

London Assembly Planning & Spatial Development Committee
Scrutiny of London in its Regional Setting

Final Hearing: 8 July 2003

Question 1: Should the pan-regional planning forum be strengthened, giving it greater powers to properly co-ordinate inter-regional planning between the three regions?

I do not believe that Assembly members would wish to see greater formal powers transferred to the Advisory Forum on Regional Planning for London, the South East and the East of England (the Inter-Regional Forum). It is advisory, and with only 5 Assembly representatives, must report back to our full Committee for ratification, which is sensible. Every Forum is so reported, and resulted in no problems to date. In practice, the Forum is able to initiate actions, as recent initiatives about airports policy and Thames Gateway show.

Mr Simmons’ paper is misleading and inaccurate in several areas, most notably from paragraph 16 onwards. The Forum meet regularly, and consider there is a constructive dialogue. I have attended every meeting of the Forum, and Mr Simmons very few, so I am no sure on what he bases his judgement.

He suggests that there are several key areas where joint research/working is now required. The Assembly agree, but all the items he lists in paragraph 18 have been agreed at the Forum as areas for joint working. The sub-regional interplay in particular is being actively pursued by this Assembly, and is a pre-requisite of our RSS work. These examples do not therefore indicate current inadequacy. It is fair to say that in the earlier stages of the Forum’s work, these issues were inadequately addressed, and in part because the Mayor’s office was too focused on intra-London issues. But I believe we are now moving on, as our current joint research on labour markets and community shows. Joint work on Regional Housing Strategies will follow, as agreed at the last Forum meeting, and further strengthen linkages.

We must see what the London Panel report says, but I believe that our interest to work together was sufficiently emphasised on that occasion. The case for ‘significant overhaul and extension’ is therefore not made, we are clearly evolving.
Question 2: Do the Government’s inter-regional growth areas strengthen the need for effective pan-regional planning arrangements?

The only inter-regional Growth Areas which affect all three regions is the Thames Gateway. There is a need for engagement and consultation in that area, not only by the Assemblies, but also by a range of other bodies. But that issue is best dealt with by specific recognition of Gateway arrangements other than the Forum. The Forum can, however, advocate change, which is primarily what the joint letter to the DPM from the Forum Assemblies now does. Again, therefore, this does not justify ‘significant’ change.

Question 3: What are the other experts’ views on Martin Simmons’ proposals that the Forum should be given increased powers to coordinate and assess the following:

- Labour markets and commuting;
- A review of comparative development and transport capacity affecting the ‘knowledge capacity’;
- A review of the metropolitan regional housing market, the effect of the London Plan’s housing policies and propensity of Londoners to move out;
- Recognition of cross-boundary inter-relations at sub-regional level and mechanisms to embrace these?

The issues, as mentioned above, have now all been agreed as items for joint action at the last Forum. This Assembly will be discussing joint briefs on sub-regional studies very shortly with the Mayor’s office.

Conclusions: Resources/Membership/Commitment

There is a need to engage in more active joint tasked working on a limited range of key issues. These, however, have already been identified and agreed. This will require an increased input of officer time and other resources by officers from the three Assemblies. But for the South East England Regional Assembly’s part, this need is recognised and is being built into our staffing and budget arrangements. We look for a similar commitment from the other regions.

Mr Simmons’ suggestions of a re-cast membership of the Forum have not been discussed with the Assembly, and we find them unhelpful and somewhat presumptuous. The involvement of the RDAs and GOs would be likely to inhibit rather than assist debate, and increase bureaucracy and formality. I believe this Assembly would be strongly opposed. The Forum minutes are already publicly available, and we report to our public Regional Planning Committee.
In short, the Forum’s work does need to increase in intensity, more officer time needs to be donated, and probably some more member time as well. But the Forum is evolving in these directions already, and ‘significant overhaul and extension’ beyond that evolution is not justified.

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