

It's the quality of life, stupid!

***The Liberal Democrat response to
consultations on the Regional Planning
Guidance for the East of England***

East of England Regional Policy Paper 1



LIBERAL DEMOCRATS



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Background

RPG 14 will replace RPG 6 (which covered Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk) and RPG 9 (which included Bedfordshire, Essex and Hertfordshire). Assuming that the current Planning and Compensation Bill becomes law, RPG 14 will become the Regional Spatial Strategy 14 (RSS 14), uniting all factors involving development and integrating the planning process with the sustainability agenda. The RSS will be implemented through new Local Development Documents (LDD) which will replace structure and local plans: these will be produced by district councils - either individually or working with partner districts. Work on the LDDs should begin in January 2004 and be complete at the end of 2006.

1. Introduction

The East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) is currently preparing Regional Planning Guidance (RPG 14) for submission to the Deputy Prime Minister in Spring 2004. This paper sets out the principles on which Liberal Democrats believe the RPG should be based; more specific policies on key issues will be developed by the Regional Party in the future.

This paper should also be taken as a response to the consultation paper published by EERA in July 2002.

2. Quality of life

To be effective, the Regional Planning Guidance must coordinate with the Regional Economic Strategy (RES). A review of the RES - which is the responsibility of the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) - has just begun and will not be complete by the time the RPG has to be submitted.

The headline target for the current RES is to move the East of England into the top 20 regions in Europe by 2010, measured by Gross Value Added (GVA) per head. This would require the regional GVA per head to grow by 3.3 per cent per annum in real terms, considerably faster than the current forecast growth rate of 2.5% per annum between 2001 and 2010. An independent study commissioned jointly by EERA and EEDA has demonstrated that such a growth rate would cause major problems in some already-overheated parts of the region, leading EERA to demand that the target date be put back to 2021.

Liberal Democrats believe that GVA is not a correct measure of overall success. Economic growth is not automatically good: for example, increased crime adds to economic growth through higher security and insurance costs but is clearly not beneficial. EERA, led by the Liberal Democrat Group, is already pushing for environmental and social welfare targets to sit alongside the GVA target.

We would go further and replace GVA as a target altogether. We believe that success should be measured in terms of sustainable quality of life. Economic growth is a tool that can be used to improve the quality of life; it is not an end in itself.

3. Vision

The RPG should provide a framework for providing a high quality of life for everyone in the region within a system that is sustainable environmentally and in its use of resources. Particular objectives should include:

- Facilitating appropriate levels of economic activity to support improvements in the quality of life in all parts of the region;
- Upgrading the quality of life of people living in the more deprived areas of the region to provide high standards of health, education, housing and other essential services;

- Meeting the housing needs of the region, especially by providing more affordable housing and by upgrading poor quality homes;
- Improving the transport infrastructure to reduce social and environmental damage;
- Protecting and, where necessary, enhancing the environmental and cultural diversity of the region;
- Minimising the region's contribution to climate change and mitigating the damage of climate change within the region.

3. Spatial strategy

There are many factors driving the need for more housing in the region, including the requirement to make up the severe deficit in affordable housing; the trend to smaller households resulting from increased divorce rates and an ageing population; and in-migration from London and elsewhere. However, there can be no certainty about the rate of increase. The Deputy Prime Minister has already announced that, as part of the Sustainable Communities Plan, he wants a further 200,000 houses built in four selected growth areas, three of which affect the East of England - Thames Gateway; Milton Keynes/South Midlands including Bedfordshire & Luton; and London/Stansted - but has not given details of how these will be split between the regions. Again, the soon-to-be-announced results of the South East Regional Airport Study will have substantial implications for the region if Stansted is identified for still further expansion.

We therefore view as fanciful any specific prescription for the number of houses to be built in the next 15 or so years. But we do recognise that the numbers will be substantial and that the RPG must identify the key general areas for major development and the principles for choosing housing sites. As a basis for this, we accept that the current most reasonable figure for housing growth is around 23,000 new homes a year and propose that the RPG should work to this for its spatial strategy and for identifying the infrastructure necessary to meet the needs of such a development rate. But we emphasise the need both to regularly review this figure and to control implementation with a strong policy of sequential land release that ensures sustainability and maximises the benefits.

The principles guiding actual siting should include:

- Previously developed land in sustainable locations in urban areas should be preferred;
- Brownfield sites such as old mineral workings in rural areas should be opposed as these are usually unsustainable;
- New settlements should be opposed unless these are immediately contiguous to existing urban areas and then only when an adequate and sustainable transport service can be provided;

- Large-scale residential developments in villages are usually unsustainable and should be opposed although small-scale developments appropriate to the village should be allowed to meet local need;
- Where essential infrastructure needs are identified as necessary for possible future development, the required land should be safeguarded;
- Support for the present policies for the Cambridge sub region and Thames Gateway area subject to the necessary infrastructure being provided at an early stage, including a new East-West rail link for the former and a Lower Thames road/rail crossing for the latter;
- In general, the priority for investment in infrastructure should be directed to those areas where high rates of housing and employment are being proposed and to depressed areas requiring regeneration where improved infrastructure is critical to improving the quality of life;
- Opposition to any increase in runway capacity at Stansted and Luton as this will put a severe strain on housing and other resources in an already-overheated area of the region and will cause major environmental damage.

In general, we believe that new development should be concentrated on the three parts of the region identified in the Sustainable Communities Plan (Thames Gateway; Milton Keynes/South Midlands including Bedfordshire & Luton; and the London/Stansted/M11 corridor) and in and around the key regional centres that provide major multimodal transport interchanges, with additional development in the market towns.

4. Housing

People on local authority housing registers are waiting years for an offer of a home of the size, or in the location, they need. In the areas of highest demand, most vacant tenancies of affordable housing go to the homeless and, even so, many homeless spend many weeks in hostels or bed and breakfast accommodation. Key workers are increasingly unable to meet rising house prices and rents in the private sector. The Affordable Housing Study prepared for the Region by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research shows that 7,160 affordable homes are needed each year to meet demand in the region; currently, only 2,260 are being built. So the enormous backlog is increasing fast instead of being reduced.

The RPG has a key role in meeting this challenge. In particular, it must include policies that meet the need for affordable homes both in terms of land allocation and, as far as the planning system can go, in protecting affordable homes from slipping into the open market and thus destroying their purpose. We propose:

- Using the Community Planning process to identify sites for affordable housing for both sales and rent;

- Ensuring that all new housing developments include at least 50% affordable housing until the need is met;
- Where appropriate, creating an alternative tier of affordable homes protected with 'golden shares' held by housing authorities;
- Requiring all district and unitary authorities to maintain a register of empty buildings that could be converted for affordable housing and, where appropriate, using the Local Development Document system to encourage such conversion.

5. Transport

Transport is a key issue not just for the economy of the Region but for the way people live and for the environment. The demands are enormous and not easily reconcilable. The growth areas clearly need substantial investment to provide essential transport links; many parts of the Region - especially those fringing London - are grossly congested and need relief; and the more deprived areas see improved transport links as being vital to their regeneration. Yet simply building more roads will merely exacerbate the environmental problems of local pollution, the disruption of communities, and climate change.

What is more, it is clear that there is no prospect of the financial resources being available to meet all the aspirations for improved transport throughout the Region.

Liberal Democrats know that transport policies can never satisfy everyone. Not only are the resources not available but the environmental priorities are often at odds with the economic and social needs. We also have to recognise that circumstances change, that decisions on other issues (the future of Stansted airport is a good example) can substantially alter transport investment priorities. So we begin by setting out the basis on which we believe decisions on regional transport issues should be taken.

First, clear, prioritised objectives for assessing all regional transport needs must be established together with assessment criteria; where they have cross-regional implications, these objectives should be agreed with our neighbours and, where national issues are concerned, with central Government. Schemes to meet these objectives can then be developed: the multi-modal study approach is a good way of carrying this out. Only then should the competing schemes be prioritised according to the agreed criteria.

The strategy and prioritised list should be reviewed regularly, probably every five years, to take account of changing circumstances. However, to be effective, this process must be quick and as simple as possible and not revisit work unnecessarily.

5.1 Objectives

Our transport objectives for the Region are long-term. Policies designed for immediate popularity will in the medium term often prove fruitless and in the long term damaging. For example, many road expansion schemes rapidly result in the extra capacity being filled by new journeys, returning the situation to its original congested state while generating still more of the pollution that is so damaging to the local quality of life and to

climate change. Again, there is a tendency for politicians and the staff who support them to prefer grandiose schemes that leave an obvious legacy to the small, local improvements that can, in practice, have a more beneficial result for ordinary people.

So our key objectives are:

- In areas where the quality of life is poor, to support regeneration by ensuring that the communications and transport infrastructure is sufficient to adequately serve business uses that benefit the local economy;
- To reduce the need for travel by
 - a) Planning to provide jobs and services as close as is practicable to where people live;
 - b) Providing an electronic communications infrastructure that enables those who want to fulfil some of their work, education and entertainment needs without travelling to do so;
 - c) Promoting retailing and distribution systems (such as home deliveries by supermarkets) that reduce the need to travel.
- To enable people to meet their travel needs conveniently, comfortably and reasonably quickly by
 - a) Low cost improvements to existing infrastructure through more locally-determined expenditure;
 - b) Improving interchangeability between travel modes, including experimenting with schemes to help bus/car/bike/walking transfers in smaller communities;
 - c) Exploiting under-used infrastructure to syphon journeys away from congested areas;
 - d) If other policies cannot meet travel needs, investment in new infrastructure will be considered, especially where congestion is the norm through long periods of the day, where safety needs are high, and where the need can be met within the environmental constraints; priority will be given to public transport solutions.
- To promote a switch from car use to more environmentally-friendly modes of transport by
 - a) Improving bus services with road space priority schemes, electronic information systems and increased capacity where demand justifies this;
 - b) Working with the Strategic Rail Authority to ensure that sufficient investment is put into the network to provide the capacity to meet demand and encourage more passengers to switch to rail;
 - c) Promoting combined, cross-mode, information and ticketing for start-to-finish journeys;
 - d) Discouraging car use in urban areas where alternatives - public transport, cycling, walking, car sharing etc - are available, using a palette of tools

- ranging from congestion charging and parking charges to incentives such as priority schemes for cars carrying more than one person;
- e) Using the income from congestion charging to invest in public transport;
 - f) Making everyday facilities such as local centres and schools accessible by safe footways and dedicated cycle tracks including providing combined cycle tracks and footpath use in rural areas.
- To promote Green Travel Plans incorporating car-sharing, flexible working and other means for businesses, schools, hospitals and so on to minimise car use and cut peak-hour congestion by
 - a) Making planning consents for commercial developments generating traffic demands dependent on the implementation of agreed Green Travel Plans;
 - b) Brokering public transport alternatives for existing major commercial traffic generators;
 - c) Providing locally-determined funding to implement School Travel Plans.
 - To promote policies that reduce the need for freight vehicle movements by
 - a) Promoting the local sourcing of goods and services where this is feasible;
 - b) Providing district freight transfer stations and local access controls where peak freight deliveries are an important component of local congestion.
 - To switch freight from road to less environmentally-damaging modes by
 - a) Making the development of new bulk freight generators subject, to the provision of a rail freight access or guiding such development to a site where such an access already exists;
 - b) Investing in new rail or water transport infrastructure where this will attract major freight movements from road transport.
 - To ensure that all developments within the Region that will generate substantial new demands for the movement of people and freight are only given the go-ahead once the necessary transport infrastructure has been agreed and funding identified by:
 - a) For major private sector housing and commercial developments, ensuring that developers pay for the additional transport infrastructure required, including the early funding of public transport services;
 - b) For projects sponsored by the state, ensuring that the full transport infrastructure costs are included within the project funding.

5.2 Targets and indicators

It is essential that targets are set and measured so that progress can be judged. We have adapted the structure suggested in the RPG consultation paper for this to reflect our own targets:

TABLE 1 Transport targets

Proposed targets and indicators		
1	Increase the proportion of journeys taken by modes other than the private car from 29% in 1998 to 35% by 2020	Mode of travel
2	Increase the percentage of rural households who can readily access public transport by 50% by 2010	Percentage of rural households able to access public transport within an hour
3	Stabilise car traffic in major urban areas ¹ at 1999 levels by 2010 and then reduce by 20% by 2020	Car journeys into major urban areas
4	Deliver PPG13 parking standards by 2010 and tighten in congested areas	Local authority parking standards
5	Double the freight carried by rail between 2000 and 2010 ² and double again by 2020	Amount of port freight carried by rail
6	Reduce the total number of transport-related accidents (all modes) by 20% by 2010 and 40% by 2020	Trends in accidents

6. Environment

The greatest medium and long-term threat to the environment of the East of England is climate change. The coastal parts of the Region have long been prone to flooding, as have some inland areas; the Region is also vulnerable to summer droughts and already suffers water shortages that could inhibit development in some of the areas that may be allocated for growth. The rise in sea levels, lower summer rainfall and the increased risk of severe storms expected to result from climate change will exacerbate these problems. It is therefore crucial that as much as possible is done to reduce the Region's global warming emissions, as well as adapting to the changes in climate that now seem inevitable.

Planners at all levels have a key role in this. On the one hand, they can act directly to improve the efficiency with which energy is used in new developments, so cutting carbon emissions. Siting developments close to amenities and adopting policies to promote a switch from road transport to less energy-intensive modes are also relevant and within the remit of planners. On the other hand, planners also have a key role in the necessary move from fossil fuel energy sources to renewables: until now, that role has tended to be negative, to reject applications for the majority of wind turbines and biomass power stations (although it should be said that there are some notable exceptions in the East of England).

Liberal Democrat policy is to put tackling climate change at the core of the planning system by setting targets for greenhouse gas emissions in regional spatial strategies and cascading targets down into the local plan system. This is not intended to force planning authorities to accept wind turbines or any other specific solution but to require them to introduce a range of policies that will ensure that the necessary climate emissions targets are achieved by balancing energy saving policies and switching to renewable sources.

Nationally, Liberal Democrats have adopted targets of a 20% cut in carbon emissions by 2010 and a 60% cut by 2050 (both compared to the 1997 level). We have also set targets of 10% of electricity to be generated from renewables by 2010, 20% by 2020, and 50% by

2050. Due to the high likely growth in the East of England, we believe that it would be unrealistic to propose more stringent overall carbon emission cuts during the life of this RSS but do suggest higher targets for renewables in recognition of the considerable potential in the Region. Our proposed targets are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Energy targets

1	Carbon emission reductions compared with 1997	20% by 2010 30% by 2020 60% by 2050
2	Proportion of electricity generated from renewable sources	12% by 2010 30% by 2020
3	Number of new houses built with solar roofs	2% by 2010 50% by 2020

These are tough targets and will require both a change in attitude and the provision of new planning tools if they are to be achieved. The main change in attitude will require a recognition that the considerable increase in renewables can only be achieved if the question of visual intrusion on the countryside is reasonably qualified by the imperative of finding renewable sources of energy. This may be easier if those who argue that they are protecting the landscape can be persuaded to recognise that unmitigated climate change will, in many cases, cause greater and longer-lasting damage than wind turbines and biomass power stations.

The new tools that are required must primarily tackle the minimisation of climate change emissions from the massive new developments likely to be built in the Region in the next 20 years. Unless these are built to the very highest standards incorporating on-site renewable energy sources where possible, excellent insulation and ultra-efficient energy-using equipment, they will continue to add to the Region's climate change problems for the next 50 years or longer.

We therefore propose that:

- The Region's climate change targets be cascaded down into every local plan.
- By 2010, every new residential development should achieve a minimum standard of the BRE's EcoHomes 'Very Good' rating or its equivalent.
- By 2015, a half of all new homes in the Region should be designed to be carbon neutral; this figure should rise to 100% by 2025.
- By 2010, every new non-residential development with a forecast annual energy consumption in excess of the equivalent of one million kWh should have to generate at least 15% of its energy from on-site renewables;
- By 2015, ensuring that 30% of electricity used in the public sector is generated from combined heat and power plants.

Of course, from a planning point of view, sustainability goes much further than energy issues. In terms of other resources, a particular issue for the East of England is water efficiency and this should be built into local plan policies and supported by clear targets including a requirement for new developments to make use of rainwater harvesting to flush toilets and irrigate gardens.

The treatment of waste is a major issue for the environment. Our long-term aspiration is to achieve zero waste and policies leading towards this goal should include:

- Minimising construction waste and recycling demolition materials;
- Treating waste locally;
- Avoiding incineration and landfill through recycling, including both in-vessel treatment for energy recovery and enclosed composting.

Biodiversity is a key issue for sustainability and local plans should both protect existing key habitats and ensure that new developments incorporate new wildlife habitats and wildlife corridors.

The Region prides itself on some very attractive landscapes and these must be protected while recognising the inevitable changes that will occur as a result of climate change. The most obvious areas for change are those threatened by coastal flooding where managed retreat - working with nature - while protecting low-lying towns and villages is the most sensible approach. Similarly, inland flood protection work should only be carried out if the results do not simply channel the threat to downstream communities. The risk to new communities can be minimised by careful siting and the use of techniques such as 'soft' drainage.

Work should begin now on identifying which aspects of the regional landscape are most likely to be altered by climate change and what measures in the long-term need to be taken to minimise the damage. For example, it seems likely that some species of shallow-rooted trees will not survive and planting programmes with more drought-resistant varieties should be considered. Similarly, it is known that tree planting in urban areas can have a useful summer-cooling effect and local plans should consider incorporating such schemes.

This paper has been approved for debate by the East of England Regional Conference by the East of England Regional Policy Committee. If approved by conference this paper will form the policy of the Regional Party.

We recognise that some of the policies outlined above depend for their effective implementation of changes in the legal, financial and planning regime. We justify their inclusion by pointing out that the Spatial Strategy is for the period ending 2021 and that we expect the necessary changes will be introduced by a Liberal Democrat Government well within this time span.

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Membership of the working group should not be taken to indicate that every member necessarily agrees with every statement or every proposal in the paper.

Comments on this paper are welcome and should be addressed to:

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