

What the White Paper says it says	What the White Paper proposes
“the plan-led approach with development plans and policies at both local and regional level on which the public is consulted, and which then provide a framework for assessing individual planning applications, is a good one” (paragraph 1.4) and will be “reinforced” (paragraph 7.40).	“planning policy will make clear that applications will be considered favourably unless there is good reason to believe that the economic, social and/or environmental costs of development are likely to outweigh the benefits” (paragraph 7.46).
“The review [of national policy] itself is not about creating new policy or changing policy” (paragraph 7.61): if this were true, why bother?	“We also propose to streamline national policy to make it more strategic, clearer and shorter” (paragraph 7.5).
Before 2004, “plans tried to anticipate every eventuality and were therefore inflexible” (paragraph 8.5).	“plans should include policies which set out the circumstances under which planning authorities should grant permission to development that had not been foreseen when the plan was made” (paragraph 7.46).
The 2004 reforms aimed to achieve “an increased evidence base for decisions – moving away from planning by assertion” (paragraph 8.6).	“If we do not increase the supply of housing from currently planned rates, the proportion of 30 year old couples able to afford their own home would drop from around 50% to around 30% by 2026” (paragraph 1.14).*
“Our intention is to build on the reforms contained in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004” (paragraph 7.40).	“However, the implementation of the reforms has thrown up some problems” (paragraph 8.8): most of Chapter 8 is devoted to tackling them.

* The favourite assertion of Yvette Cooper, the Planning Minister.

References

1. Oates, M (2007) ‘The soul within’, *ECOS 28* (1) 19-26.
2. Planning for a Sustainable Future: White Paper www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?1510503
3. Nathaniel Lichfield, September 2003, *Review of Permitted Development Rights*, A report for ODPM.
4. Land Use Consultants, (in press), *Wood Lotting in Kent*, Kent Downs AONB Unit, Kent County Council & Forestry Commission.

Dick Bate is an independent consultant specialising in planning issues. He is a partner of *Green Balance*. richardbate@greenbalance.co.uk

A White Paper for planning growth

The Planning White Paper contradicts the Government's own agendas on working with communities, policy-integration, and pursuing a low-carbon economy.

ROGER LEVETT

Early in 2007 Tony Blair unexpectedly gave a speech extolling the arts and their contribution to British civilisation. Canny observers predicted that arts lottery funding was about to be raided to subsidise London’s Olympics. And so it proved. So when the Government issues a planning White Paper with a cover picture of a winsome child surveying the model-board of a planning-for-real exercise, and full of pious statements about the value and importance of planning, a natural reaction is to suspect that the planning system is about to be shafted. Especially given that the White Paper largely implements recommendations of the Barker Review of the planning system, whose terms of reference required it to prioritise economic growth and competitiveness over all other objectives and to treat the planning system primarily as an obstacle to ‘growth’.

There is some good in the White Paper. It proposes some sensible simplifications (albeit many only needed to curb the eccentricities brought in by the 2004 planning reforms). It lists some important ways in which planning for climate change is being strengthened, although these were already announced by Ruth Kelly in December 2006. It is hard to disagree that the planning system should be ‘positive’, ‘responsive’ and ‘efficient’, except that these words mean positive about development, responsive to business, and efficient in giving it what it wants.

Infrastructure – a national view

The main substantive proposal is for a new process of deciding on ‘nationally important infrastructure’ projects such as new and upgraded airports, motorways, railways, reservoirs and energy generation, transmission and storage.

The White Paper accepts Kate Barker's proposal that Government should produce national policy statements about infrastructure needs, and that a new quango, the Infrastructure Commission, should apply these to decide on individual projects. This mechanism of an arms-length technocratic body to deliver politically set targets is a direct copy of Gordon Brown's 1997 innovation that Government would set targets for inflation but the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee (of which Kate Barker is a member) would control interest rates to meet these targets. The reasons offered for this radical change are, based on Barker, that the current system is slow, creates uncertainty and blight, and that it delays and can prevent the UK getting the infrastructure it wants and needs. So do these arguments stack up?

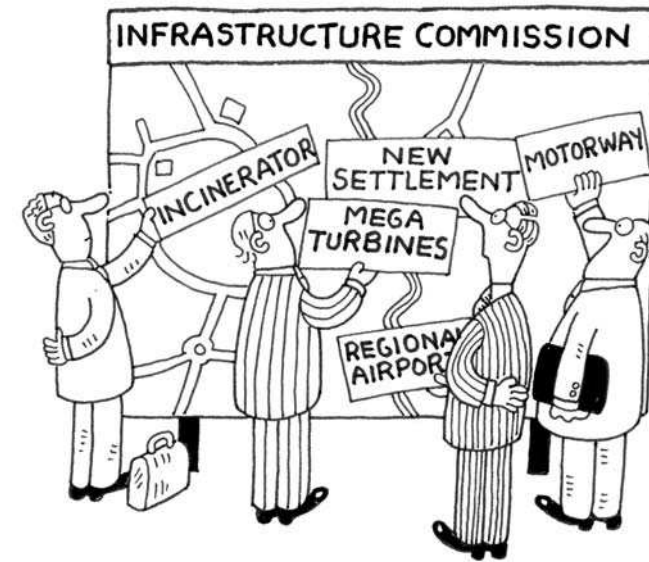
Is the current system slow?

On the question of decision-making time, both Barker and the White Paper suggest that all infrastructure projects become mired in Dickensian wrangles for decades. In fact only a handful of projects get drawn out. Barker quotes only 6 from the last decade, and only 2 of those, Dibden Bay port and Heathrow Terminal 5, had planning processes that took more than 43 months overall. The White Paper quotes 11, only one of which (Dibden again) took significantly more than 2 years. That doesn't seem terribly unreasonable for such complex and contentious matters. Barker cites the 4 years and £45m costs of Dibden as a notable example, but the reality is that it was long and costly because the developers persisted in promoting a project whose environmental downsides were severe. It should be seen as a sign of how hard developers will try to get profitable development through despite the odds, not of defects in planning. Indeed the planning process comes out of this rather well: allowing the developers to make their case, looking scrupulously at the evidence, and in the end declining to be bought by their deep pockets.

Moreover, Ministerial decision after the planning inquiry had reported took at least half a year in 8 of the White Paper's 11 examples – over a year in 3 of them. Many of these projects needed substantial public funding, or had big implications for a range of projects, programmes and policies, so it's not surprising that it often takes ministers and departments to work these through, decide whose budgets are going to foot the tab and so on. But this will still be the case even if the new Commission makes the planning decision. Unless, of course, the Commission is going to be given sovereign power to commit government budgets and pre-empt decisions on all the consequences of infrastructure projects – something neither Barker nor the White Paper authors seem to have thought of.

Blight – the real causes

As to blight, major infrastructure projects are often 'in the air', depressing property values and causing anxiety and unsettling residents, for years or even decades before planning processes even start. Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted have all been under varying threats of expansion since the 1960s; a large new reservoir near Abingdon has been under serious consideration since the 1970s, and schemes to join up the remnants of the Grand Central Railway to make a new high speed connection capable of carrying continental-size goods wagons and truck trailers direct from the North of England to the Continent have been promoted since the decision to build the Channel Tunnel made them possible. Often negotiations over funding and operation continue concurrently with planning processes and carry on after them, so even a long planning process may add little or nothing to the total time from a project first being mooted and construction starting. In any case it's the threat that something huge and horrible is about to be built at the end of your garden or over the top of your demolished house that creates blight, not the process of planning for it. If we want less blight, the answer is less development, not tinkering with the way we plan it.



Disruptive delay or careful scrutiny?

The White Paper's third justification for reform is that the current process "can delay delivery of key infrastructure, with harmful knock on effects for communities, business, the economy and the environment. And it can, in some cases, deter promoters from bringing forward projects in the first place, threatening our ability to deliver the infrastructure we need to continue to thrive as a nation."

The assumption is that ever more infrastructure is essential for our national wellbeing, including the environment. There are three problems with this claim:

First, infrastructure inevitably and intrinsically gets harder to accommodate for a very simple reason. The first time someone wants to build some new kind of infrastructure, they'll choose the site that provides the most benefit for the least costs. For example when a city needs more water, the first choice for a reservoir will be a nice deep valley where a small dam and a small land area can store a large amount of water from a reliable river, handy for the city. The first railway or road between two points will choose a direct, flat route with as few obstacles or buildings in the way.

The next reservoir or transport link will therefore need to go somewhere a bit less convenient and suitable – and so on: unless one of the pioneers got it seriously wrong, or technologies change dramatically, each increment of the same kind of infrastructure will yield less benefit for more cost and disruption. The problem is worsened by two other factors: our finite land area is steadily filling up anywhere so there is progressively less room for infrastructure, and more people likely to be affected by it, and our amenity standards and expectations rise, so disruption becomes less acceptable.

Second, infrastructure is not always an unalloyed good. Road capacity expansion allows and stimulates traffic growth, erodes local cohesion and distinctiveness and deepens the disadvantage of not having a car. Air travel expansion increases the net flow of tourism income out of the country, stimulates profligate food importing and a totally unnecessary 'air culture' of frequent trips and foreign second homes. If we now have an urgent need for what the White Paper coyly calls 'energy security infrastructure' - presumably a euphemism for nuclear power stations and bigger gas holders - it's largely because through the 80s and 90s we so enthusiastically built 'energy insecurity infrastructure' in the form of cheap and cheerful new power stations to squander our gas reserves on inefficient electricity generation, dumping the social costs of fractured coalfield communities on the public sector and leaving us vulnerable to the economic opportunism of an array of ex-Soviet bandit states.

Third, the need to address climate change. The White Paper is peppered with protestations about its importance and statements such as "National policy statements would need to address the vital issues of mitigation and adaptation to climate change. The potential impact of infrastructure on carbon dioxide emissions, and how to minimise this impact as far as possible, would have to be considered in developing national policy statements ..."

But there is a huge inconsistency. There is now clear evidence that improvements in eco-efficiency are undermined by 'rebound effects', so that at best they prevent further increases in greenhouse gas emissions, and have no hope of achieving major reductions. It is also becoming embarrassingly clear that carbon trading - the Government's other big hope for painless decarbonisation - is largely ineffective where it is not actually counterproductive, and that in any case all trading does is shift the problem around: to be more than a sham, someone, somewhere, still has to reduce emissions.

Sustainable or not?

So achieving even the Government's target of 60% carbon reductions by 2050, let alone the 80% or more than climate science now points to, requires us to learn to live well with a great deal less of the driving, flying, heating, flushing and chucking that create the emissions. And if we do less of these things, it follows that we will need less of the centralised infrastructure that enables them, not more.

A sustainable approach to infrastructure planning therefore needs to give priority to avoiding or obviating infrastructure, followed by local, low-carbon, sustainable methods. The White Paper's proposals to make it quicker and easier to get permission to build centralised high-carbon infrastructure are therefore precisely the wrong way to go for climate change. As well as based on flimsy evidence and unwarranted assumptions, the proposals are deeply questionable for quality of life.

*Roger Levett jointly directs the sustainability consultants Levett-Therivel.
roger@levett-therivel.fsnet.co.uk*

Energy Watch

The Government's Energy White Paper is published against a backdrop of apparently accelerating climate change worldwide with droughts and floods and rising CO₂ levels. This article assesses the White Paper along with other recent books on energy and climate.

PETER TAYLOR

Newspaper headlines over the past few months have highlighted the notion that climate change has now accelerated faster than scientific models have predicted. Almost any environmental disaster is now laid at its door but seldom with reference to natural variability and cycles. In the news are major floods and storms in eastern Australia, severe drought in the USA, an influx of exotic birds to the UK, and floods affecting Britain during the summer.

The EU's new target of 20% by 2020

In response to the ever growing and almost entirely uncritical public and media concern, the EU has pushed through a new target of a 20% cut in CO₂ emissions by 2020, and is leaning on some of the under-performing states. There is now an EU target of 5% biofuels in the fuel tanks of all cars by 2010 - to be increased to 10% when the administration has worked out whether this can be done 'sustainably'.

Who is monitoring the environmental impact of these targets? Was any kind of strategic EIA performed before they were agreed? Apparently not. Some European Parliamentarians regret signing up in such haste as they now contemplate the implications. In Britain the Carnegie Trust has just reported on how wind turbine infrastructure tears communities apart and we have yet to see the consequences for the countryside of large woodchip power stations proposed in Devon, Somerset and Wiltshire. This pattern will also roll out across Europe. For example, the Greek island of Skyros, famed for its beauty, Eleanora's falcons and nesting sea eagles, now faces a 300 MW turbine development on what the developer describes as 'a useless rocky wilderness'.

Atlas of Climate Change

We could do with someone mapping all of these impacts. Sadly, Earthscan's recent *Atlas of Climate Change* has a blind spot on this issue and maps only the consequences of the disease and not the supposed remedy. The *Atlas* has maps on climate-vulnerable biodiversity but not on the expected impact of turbines, tidal power, or biofuels on that same wild habitat. The *Atlas* does contain some useful global indicators - it lists for example, how far countries have responded to the Kyoto Protocol. Only the UK (13%), France (5%), Luxembourg (16%), Germany