

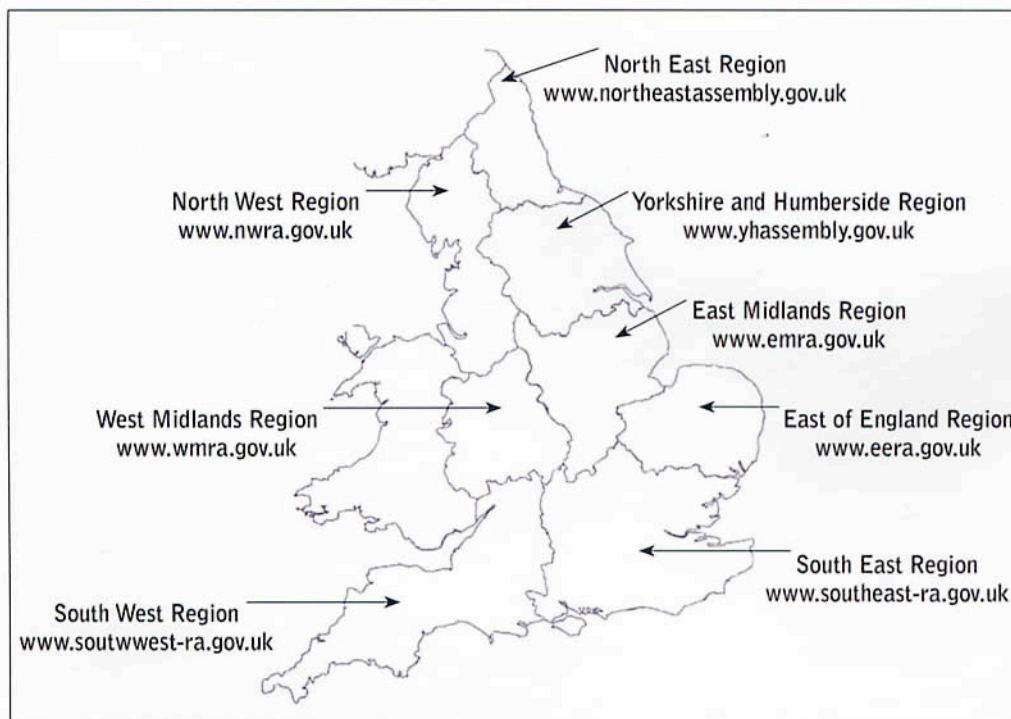
Will Regional Spatial Strategies put local areas under threat?

Continuing the series on planning, Dr Wendy Le Las looks into the issue of the new Regional Spatial Strategies

With the advent of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, in 2004, all Regional Planning Guidance became Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs). Unlike their predecessors, RSSs have the weight of statutory status, being formally part of the development plan.

They have taken place of Structure Plans which are no longer 'legal tender'; they officially died on 28 September 2007, although no doubt they will haunt the system for some years. RSSs are supposed to express a strategy for development over the next 15 to 20 years.

In the government's view it is essential that the general public, not just focus groups, be involved throughout the process of formulating an RSS. The Regional Assembly's (RA's) statement of public participation should set out how and when the public and the official partners will be involved in the formulation of the RSS.



What are Regional Spatial Strategies?

RSSs incorporate a range of regional and sub-regional strategies on transport, housing, economic development, culture, biodiversity, climate change, energy, education, health, sustainable development, and regional policy in the EU.

Therefore, if your council is fighting a case against a local planning authority (LPA) or at an inquiry, it is worth hunting for ammunition in the RSSs for your region, or indeed the RA's other publications. The map shows you which region you are in and your RA's website address.

Getting involved

As yet no new RSSs have been completed so if you are concerned about certain policies, find out when is the next opportunity to get involved.

Stage 1

Stage 1 is the drawing up of a Project Plan with the local Government Office and the community.

Stage 2

Stage 2 focuses on developing options and policies by means of testing different options to different scenarios. The favoured option can then be developed along with the detailed policies needed to deliver it.

Stage 3

Stage 3 is the submission of the draft RSS and participation statement to the Planning Inspectorate. Copies are sent to the local authorities and are available for public inspection and online.

The consultation period is six to twelve weeks, depending on the complexity of the document. During this period the Examination in Public (EIP) is set up, with the appointment by the Planning inspectorate of the chairman, panel members and secretariat. They vet the submission from the public. If your council has views, this is the time to lobby the panel.

Stage 4

Stage 4 is the examination in Public (EIP). It takes the form of a seminar to test the soundness of RSS. Topics discussed are chosen by the panel. Local councils can be invited if they have a real contribution to make on a specific issue. Views are submitted beforehand and the discussion tightly focused by the chairman or panel members.

Criteria for assessing the soundness of the RSS falls into three groups; procedural, conformity with national policy and other regional plans; and internal coherence, consistency and effectiveness.

Stage 5

Stage 5 is the Panel Report. The panel's report to the Government office is published around two months after the end of EIP.

Stage 6

Stage 6 consists of the publication of the secretary of state's views on the panel's report and the issue of the RSS. The secretary of State's proposed changes to the draft RSS will be published with a reasoned statement of the decisions: there are eight weeks for public comment.

Following consideration of all representations, the RSS will be published incorporating the secretary of state's final changes together with a statement of reasons for any further changes made. If there are radical changes, as has happened in the East of England, then they have to be tested for sustainability.

What next?

The government's intention was for piecemeal updating of the RSS, to reflect new policies. The South West RSS is to be updated on policies for Gypsies, for example.

Across the board, this is easier said than done because, in land-use, everything is inter-related. Five-yearly comprehensive reviews seem the only answer.

All Change?

Currently each RA reflects the character of its region. Approximately 70 per cent are LPA members, including National Parks, and some 30 per cent drawn from representatives from industry, trade unions, education, NHS, small business, cultural organisations, environmental groups and local councils – at least for the moment! Currently an axe is suspended above RAs.

In July, the government announced that the regional Development Agencies (RDAs) will assume the executive responsibilities currently held by RAs for developing RSS. Under the proposed scheme, LPAs will scrutinise the work of the RDAs. There have been howls of protest from planners and environmentalists at all levels. Putting the RDAs in charge is seen as appointing Herod to run play-group.

It is arguable that the regional tier needs tidying up, and there are tensions between cities and their hinterlands, but the problem is accountability. Watch this space.