Summary of Institutional Memory Seminar: Strategic Planning and the rural urban fringe.

Rural Urban fringe

To what extent did your agency focus on the RUF?

Board notes

- Individual Project Orientation otherwise protectionist via Green Belt
- Greenbelt and containment.
- Only where there were significant issues eg greenbelt.
- Where we can through promotion of sites although usually unsuccessfully though.
- Little specific focus on ruf except where it touched on projects/initiatives eg vacant farm buildings and their economic potential
- The RSS generally focuses on broader themes of urban-rural relationships with the aim of restructuring peripheral development in support of urban regeneration (renaissance)
- GOWM felt it was addressed but via defra and dclg
- Worked across neighbouring boundaries on LTP and investment decisions.

Discussion

The discussion revolved around three main areas – what is the RUF, how people had engaged with it and around best (and worst) case examples to learn from.

1. The nature of the RUF beast

The geographical extent of the fringe and its extent and nature raised the issue of its identity and how best to plan for it. The question of how this research was addressing this was raised. The answer was that no set definition was being advanced as the research was capturing what has been/is and will be used by the different stakeholders involved.

The complexity of governance (sorry!) was raised through the nature of the interrelationships between Defra and CLG and its constituent next step agencies. The accepted view was that there had been and continues to be poor communication. Unpacking this revealed the perception that Defra saw regional planning as a threat to its own interests. This was evident in the limited and negative way Defra agencies have engaged with the regional planning agenda.

2. RUF engagement

The RSS was predicated upon a simple proposition which had the strong support of the region. The big choice was do we go for areas of opportunity (like the RUF) or areas of need. The favoured route was to “create opportunities in areas of need”. This had universal support and within the EIP it was
agreed by the Inspector as a high risk strategy that might just work. However, at this regional scale there was a fundamental question of the role of the RSS in looking at the RUF/URF; is it a local issue about local management or something where a more strategic and cross boundary view was taken. Problems of taking a strategic view.

However, the general thrust of the board notes was that RUF policy was focussed heavily on the green belt first and foremost with consequential effects for the remaining spaces. This tended to emphasise and even champion a culture of negativity and restriction which restricted the freedom of manoeuvre for planners and the development industry.

This negativity meant that the RUF was an area that was never properly handled in this region. Lots of policies for restraint do provide consistency of approach which can be traced through all the key planning and economic documents. In effect stopping things happening and the resultant policies for management maintained the preservation culture. There was a lack of positive/proactive policies for how the region (RUF) was going to change because nobody could accept that the region was going to change.

It was felt that the West Midlands had its own economic and political geography which magnified these outcomes, whilst other regions performed differently (East Mids and SW) with positive approaches for addressing urban restraint. Furthermore, the RTPI was positive about reviewing GB boundaries. In the West Midlands the resultant effect was that RUF became a battleground where only those who were powerful/lucky were able to overturn GB restrictions.

Consequently many agencies did not have a particular view on the fringe space except when it was part of an actual project. Although some pieces of work and evidence were commissioned, they addressed particular features of the fringe landscape (eg historic buildings/barn conversions) and existing work programmes related to areas in greatest need concomitant with the national government targets.

In retrospective the RSS was very broad in its approach to RUF issues. This was clearly due to the regional geography and issues of connectivity between the region and its centre. The regional level was not that big and remote, it had high levels of connectivity and consequently the strategic management of the RUF was not explicit. A key consideration here was the way scale exerted its influence on the development.

Planning was seen too have failed on the development and delivery of detailed local urban fringe policies. Here, failure to manage what has always been an area of change impacted negatively on investment decisions; you don’t get people investing when you don’t know what is going to happen. So whilst there might have been lots of posturing about the fringe, when it came down to it we don’t really do much in the local context.

It was important to realise though that the RUF was different and individual reflecting different needs and priorities according to local circumstances. Hence the need to produce different typologies of the nature of change and the changing economics of the fringe. Consequently we had approaches and outcomes that tended to fossilize some parts of the RUF and steam ahead into other parts without being based on any clear plan.
3. **What examples can demonstrate worst/best practice**

**Board notes**

- What account taken of previous studies: all get lost in the ether.
- No requirement for cross local authority consideration
- Green belt policy application eg black country sub regional strategy – urban park
- The conurbation fringe with different issues a-h circle
- Both good and bad examples around the conurbation
- Generally the WM conurbation has avoided problems of sprawl and environmental decline.
- Forest of Mercia and Operation South Cannock
- Example of urban extension at Newark (Notts).
- Linking cross boundary partnerships. Eg investments in railway lines from metropolitan to shire.
- Transition from rural/agricultural to urban/residential /employment uses with no underlying typology

**Discussion**

Rather than focus in detail on the examples the discussion tried to identify the key generic principles that might lead to good or bad practice /outcomes.

Where the urban fringe is green belt this is seen as negative - for preservation rather than management - and this has skewed management policies for RUF. There was some support for rethinking GB policy as we were stuck with a millstone round our necks. It is too sacrosanct and has caused real affordability problems as well as shaping preservationist public views which have restricted freedom to think about alternatives. For example the green fingers approach widely practised in Europe which could have helped regeneration and encourage a range of housing development with ecological spaces.

The example of Solihull attracted significant comment highlighting both perceived good and poor practice elements. The issue of sprawl was not seen as a major feature of W Midlands and partly due to the protection there; however infrastructure has come in across that

The good was seen through its placemaking approach that met the needs of Solihull and imposed its own pattern of development that wasn’t based on edges but on wedges. See trees/forest as providing attractive edges. The sites were developed via a study where alternatives were assessed. The proposed site was seen as the best for investment and market opportunity. The approach however did raise issues about whether development would break through the M42 gap particularly given ownership

The ingredients for successful RUF initiatives

However a more critical look revealed the importance of integrating development across all sectors. For example the lack of public transport in the Solihull example was observed as a deficiency in joined up planning. Furthermore the issue of internal demand was identified and the concept of capacity was deemed critical. Here a decentralising component might provide the driver but there
was a need to demonstrate that there is additional capacity; particularly the environmental capacity.

The issue of need (what is it for) was also seen as important rather than the approach that was rooted in one particular perspective whether it was market, economic development, regeneration or urban renaissance. This was complicated by the large numbers of stakeholders and interests in the kind of RUF that is wanted or needed. Thus leads to conflict in this area about what it should be used for. Hence you need a strategic overview to resolve those issues. There are lots of stakeholders but you cannot use a one size fits all approach as you have to analyse each place with a different set of people with people that go through it. This raises a key issue relating to the quality of evidence.

The example of the Forest of Mercia was highlighted here as a positive use of urban fringe if it has a function of providing access space for the urban area. Positive examples of trying to do something for recreation as an amenity asset. This ties in with the notion of green infrastructure which was raised as an important component of infrastructure development in the RUF.

The challenge was seen to lie in creating attractive urban growth. And here the key ingredients were:

- developing and responding to a long term for RUF growth. (positive planning) Planners and developers working together which was extremely rare.
- Planning something designed to be a full stop with a vista view, houses facing the right direction.
- Looking at the edge with buildings facing south and using trees to soften the edge boundary.
- The issue of scale of development where small and the “right” scale was seen as acceptable (eg Dickens Heath) as opposed to larger scale development which was deemed unacceptable.
- Absence of political boundaries
- Clear direction the economy is going in. This allows areas to be identified for future development in short, medium and long term.
- Looking across sector dependencies; eg farm holdings where a conscious decision taken to sell off one holding for development and support another for long term agriculture

However you have to remember the uniqueness, individuality and cyclical nature of the fringe as it transcends a hotpotch of uses allotments, self storage, little chefs which you have to provide for. Hence the urban edge is changing all the time. Here the horticulture element was singled out for special critical attention and seen as negative but reflecting the issue of land ownership and how this can create tension in urban fringe. People owning land waiting for development and also rural farmers not wanting people to access the land and also wanting over time to release land for housing. It was recognised however that rural symbolised a protectionist ethos.

In looking at what was good and bad it came down to what was it we need. Here the need to identify current trends and the nature of urban – rural interrelationships. The view was advanced that rural hinterlands my become fractured from urban areas as cities become connected to each other and
the implications for the fringe may lead to their disinvestment as urban areas don’t necessarily grow outwards. The economic raison d’etre for a place is now weakened meaning that the conurbation may not be successful and it may not grow. Here the history of place and its geography is crucial and it was highlighted that the West Midlands had more disadvantage and misfortune that had prevented growth when compared with the SE for example.

No model was identified for the fringe but different typologies for different situations. Strong undercurrent that RUF requires individual understanding of the needs and issues and then a suitable model for development.

Short termism arises from uncertainty. If you have a certainty about where places are going to be developed that enables each sector to invest appropriately leading to integrated development. The current situation goes right against this.

However this view was countered drawing on the Japanese investments in the 1980s where large sites were required. We found large sites as opportunity spaces with an approach was to have locations so that if big fish comes around we have major investment sites to be realised. Therefore we can plan for uncertainty.

The Ecological perspective

The importance of ecological systems via agriculture and forestry in the ruf is really important. With the current recession there is a very real risk of short termism via the selling off of farm land near urban edges and with that in mind owners/farmers may not bother farming it properly. Implications for food production.

Issue of environmental capacity, particularly given infrastructure developed into urban areas and around them. Defra would also highlight Green infrastructure as a key ingredient here in planning. Interestingly agriculture land has reduced ecological benefits as it has been intensified through subsidies yet roads and railways seem to attract conservation. Eg great crested newts ("live anywhere")!

What key challenges face management of change in the RUF?

Board notes

- Definition of ruf: immediate edge, broad area or more general urban rural interrelationships
- Need to promote and recognise the value of the ruf
- Current uncertainty means developers are being short term and opportunistic and therefore on one is being strategic and long term.
- Need to consider mechanism for cross local authority working.
- Need for cooperation and joint action
• Solihull and Meriden gap interesting example.
• RUF or URF are you looking in or out. Is it about urban or rural needs. Whose needs should prevail?
• Does the urban area necessarily have to grow. Lots of RUF discourses based on the assumption that cities will enlarge.
• Consistent issue of lack of communication between defra and clg. Defra see the spatial planning angle as threat and issue of how defra agencies are involved in the planning process. This has a major effect on how the RUF is dealt with
• Localism divide and rule
• Depends on how new arrangements work out; will authorities abandon current strategies in which case there is real danger of haphazard approaches to single issues rather than an integrated approach; tensions and competitions between places with economic priorities dominating.
• Lack of clarity on policy; growth of towns and cities relies on reviewing green belt and urban fringe policies
• Market resources in area will lead to a desire for peripheral development.

Challenges

Localism is really important within LEP boundary as the incentive for peripheral development will not attract votes. There will also be a disincentive to work across boundaries. Previous point made is that it might reinforce existing geographies. The political institutional boundaries are really big issues.

URF issues are apparently more significant elsewhere but generally within the West Midlands have been poorly dealt with. But the economic geography of western world is changing. Dislocation between cities and hinterland will change as big cities increasingly connect to each other. The hinterland will become less important and will be dislocated. The view was advanced that this has not been really anticipated. The implications for the RUF are significant. Moving from an area of change and investment to one of decline. City–periphery change we need a new model?

Lack of clarity and policy is a real challenge. We don’t know where policy is going at the moment. There is a lot of buck passing going on allowing individual actions and interpretations and the Govt is still saying do what you want. However GB is a sacred cow or perhaps?????

This leaves developers/local authorities in a mess where strategic sites are not being identified or developed as you have to invest land for development. Too many developers are currently living off their own fat and existing commitments until the system resolves itself.

Depressing scenario with no long term planning going on. Big risk is that no one is looking after the ruf battleground for where development is going is on authority edges. How do we plan for it?