

Lyons Inquiry into Local Government

Consultation Paper and Interim Report

Response by Strategic Planning Advice Ltd on behalf of the Rutland Group

Introduction

The Rutland Group is a private development and investment company which has been responsible for a number of major development projects, for example Bedfont Lakes near Heathrow (250 acres of landfill in the Green Belt transformed into a 180-acre country park, five acres of housing and three quarters of a million square feet of high quality business space now occupied by companies such as IBM, Cisco, SAP and Alcatel). The company now wishes to develop a sustainable new community of some 2600 homes adjacent to the half million square feet of employment space on Dunsfold Aerodrome near Cranleigh in Surrey. A planning application is due to be submitted later this year. Strategic Planning Advice Ltd are the lead consultants for both these projects.

Context

The context for the Inquiry needs to be seen very clearly as the strain being felt in various key facets of modern life:

- Our inability to restrain our use of natural resources and or our impact on the environment.
- Our inability to ensure that all young people are educated to a minimum civilised level.
- The difficulty of delivering care, whether medical or social, that is recognised by those receiving care as being of sufficient quality, in spite of unprecedented sums being expended on, for example, the health service.
- The offence to common sense and good economy that is provoked by, for example, the juxtaposition of insufficient staff to provide key services, unemployment and able-bodied and talented pensioners with inadequate pensions.

We seem to be reaching certain limits on the ability to deliver of centrally funded and centrally driven services:

- It is difficult for central services to provide joined up services at the point of service delivery: the individual or the community.
- It is difficult for central services to fine tune their response to strike the right balance between supporting individuals and their particular needs and enabling them to contribute according to their abilities to the well-being of their community.
- Targets seem incapable of reflecting truly the changes in local conditions as local people see them; there are frequent reports of lower crime rates accompanied by local views that the place does not feel any safer.

The issue of accountability seems to be close to the heart of the issues the Inquiry faces. It seems absurd that major cities such as Birmingham and Leeds, that were founded on locally funded municipal enterprise, are now responsible for only 25% (on average) of their own funding and are subject to such heavy central direction. Equally it seems absurd that local communities, often heavily dependent on commuting and expensively imported food and supplies, are unaware of the wider costs of their lifestyles: costs in environmental terms and in terms of the lack of time to devote to caring for young people and vulnerable groups.

New Institutional Frameworks

It is Rutland's view that new institutional frameworks are needed which will be

- Responsive to the needs of individuals, small groups and local communities
- Capable of bringing into fulfilling and beneficial use the abilities of all people
- Able to recognise and value the environmental and resource assets of the area and bring them into use whilst avoiding their depletion
- Capable of maximising the potential of local firms, individuals and organisations working together.

Dunstable Park New Community

The Rutland Group is heavily committed to working with local communities to produce developments that address local needs and which make best use of local resources. The linked brochure (www.dunstablepark.com, link to exhibition) demonstrates how these aims are to be achieved at Dunstable Park, where Rutland has set their planning team the challenge of creating an international model of sustainable development.

S.106 & Planning Gain Supplement

A central feature of the Dunstable Park proposals is that they will be 100% privately funded, including the provision of affordable housing and off-site infrastructure. It is intended that the package of works to be supported by the development will be governed by a s.106 agreement.

Rutland is very concerned that the funding will be undermined by the introduction of the Planning Gain Supplement (PGS), which in the case of a site in Waverley, Surrey, will lead to a severe loss of funds for infrastructure for the area. The attached response to the PGS Consultation sets out Rutland's views on the proposal, together with a suggestion for an exception to the proposal for fully funded local schemes.

S.106 agreements are, along with Business Improvement Districts, the only funding mechanisms in the local government realm in which there is, or can be, a watertight link between the source of the funds and the purposes to which they are applied. This provides a powerful perception of change and improvement and is therefore valuable in being able to call forth additional resources that would be reluctantly provided through general taxation.

New Institutions for C21st

Rutland sees the opportunity at Dunsfold Park to re-discover some the social and economic relationships that make for more sustainable communities, firstly at the level of the planned new community and secondly at the level of the cluster of communities around Cranleigh of which the new village will become a member. The attached submission to the South East of England Development Agency on the Review of their Regional Economic Strategy sets out some of Rutland's thinking on the role for local communities in the future.

We suggest that the Inquiry look for local government structures and funding mechanisms (the latter are fundamental) that will achieve some of the strategic objectives set out above. It probably points to strong local government that is accountable through elections, consultation and taxation to local communities. It should also include a stronger voice for employers (public and private) in the election and operation of local government (it is unbalanced and unsustainable that local authorities have much more powerful incentives (votes and Council Tax) to address residents and housing than those for the local economy).

Ian McDonald
Strategic Planning Advice Ltd
13th March 2006