

# Notes from Planning Research Network<sup>1</sup>

13 October 2003

## Morning discussion

1. Important to maintain linkages with other ODPM Research Networks. Decision: Promote Network websites and provide central information on the ODPM research pages. This will help address underlap/overlap issues. **Action:** ODPM Strategic Research Team to keep information on ODPM up-to-date, Simin and team to put links from PRN Website to other Network websites and ODPM site.
2. Important to maintain inter-departmental links with other Government research e.g. DfT, Defra possibly via a theme based website. **Action:** Stephen L to continue research-scanning with the document available via the PRN website (password protected section). Network members to inform Steve about current research. ODPM SRT to evaluate other cross-Government linkages.
3. Important not to be 'boxed in' by policy framework - theme based. Also need to identify which other areas of Government are interested in elements of research e.g. RDAs, DTI. **Action:** Take every opportunity to maintain and enhance linkages. Make use of theme-based seminar to explore issues cutting across the four networks.
4. Evidence-based policy. This was recognised as a critical underlying issue. The Network sought assurance about commitment to this issue especially from Ministers. It was also critical for the spending review process. **Action:** Maintain and enhance as core underlying principle of policy development.
5. In addition to policy-relevant research, there is a need of research for practitioners including policy / practice on the ground. **Action:** Maintain the balance within ODPM research programme and recognise this need.
6. Agreed that Policy and Research Seminars should be the core function of the Network, to be used to develop themes, and to maintain a fluid involvement of others from outside the Network on specific issues. These seminars would enable others to be influenced and research commissioned to provide outcomes. **Action:** Simin, ODPM and Network members to discuss possible seminar in early 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> These draw on the notes taken by Tony Pike, PRN Co-ordination Team, Cecilia Wong, David Adams and the rapporteurs' reports.

7. Agreed that Network should advise on research principally but also take an interest in policy with a view that research informs policy and also underpins good practice / practice guides. The critical thing is to find the 'headline' issues.
8. One way to link policy and research (a 'short cut') is to ensure that senior policy advisors / makers (in ODPM) are fully engaged in research-based seminars. **Action:** ODPM to ensure representation.
9. Research capacity development is crucial and the Planning Research Prize should not be restricted to Planning Schools but also include consultancies etc. Agreed that a selection panel would be established to take this forward. Also, the ODPM is hoping to extend other young researcher support to other funding bodies beyond the ESRC. **Action:** Simin to put forward proposals for the prize process and nominate possible members of the selection panel.
10. All information will be made available through the Website, discussion forum and through links to other websites. **Action:** Simin and team to keep up-to-date and Network members to actively use.
11. Research Programme Planning. The breakout sessions will be used to outline research priorities, to look beyond the current ODPM research programme, and determine how the Network can influence other research funders. The conclusions will be used in early discussions to inform the future ODPM research programme covering the planning, housing, urban, neighbourhood and sustainable communities agenda. There will be a further meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> November with a limited number of Network members to prioritise issues with the other Networks. It was stressed that the research resources within ODPM were diminishing and there were a considerable number of 'near policy' research requirements in addition to the need for more strategic and forward-looking research. It is hoped that this first stage in the exercise will improve the translation of research into policy but the process will not be perfected in this first year. **Action:** ODPM to keep the Network fully informed throughout the process and encourage better co-ordination of research which in turn will save cost.

## **Break-out Sessions**

### **1. Strategic issues and the evidence base**

#### **1.1 What are the main issues for policy implementation and development, both in terms of the Office's agenda and the wider Government agenda in the areas covered by the Network?**

More than one group felt that the ODPM Planning Research Programme needs to focus on more substantive issues than hitherto, and be more outward looking. Among the specific areas identified as worthy of detailed research were the following:

- There is a need for more evidence-based assertion of a policy focused on the growth driver of the South East. Similarly, there is a need to have proper assessment of strategic policy decisions on housing provision and housing land release, and an urgent need to ascertain the impact (including those unintended side effects) brought about by the 60% brownfield targets and the high density development ethos. There are concerns over the different regional and spatial impacts brought about by such policies e.g. artificially inflated house prices in certain areas; displacement of second and third order services in certain locations and the negative impact of local morphology.
- There was also support for examining the changing nature of economic processes and activities and the extent to which they are likely to generate future growth or decline. Linked to this is the need to understand the relationship between Regional Spatial Strategies and Regional Economic Strategies.

#### **1.2 What is the state of the evidence base in relation to these issues?**

- The lack of a properly articulated evidence base for the above suggests a need for means of asserting major strategic policy choice through methods such as cost-benefit analysis in some cases, or futures techniques.
- In other areas, not enough is known to support many policy assumptions, such as in transport and development, travel to work, etc; the relationship between land values and the housing market dynamics; the interface between housing and other services e.g. schools and GPs; the demographic impact brought by affordable housing policy, and uses of S.106.

#### **1.3 What research is needed to fill gaps, both medium and long term?**

- One group felt that it would be useful to be able to understand what kinds of city regions are being created by the rapid process of change currently evident, and to be able to compare this with what

kinds of city regions would we like to see in the future? This was supported by at least one other group who would like to see research into the precise drivers of the rapid change currently evident across city regions, and the specific balance between global and local factors in explaining that change.

While there was recognition of the importance of researching into some strategic issues, it was also seen as important to maintain research on examining the planning process. Therefore:

- There is a need to provide clarification and key rationale underpinning the forthcoming PPS 1 on the nature and purpose of spatial planning. What is the purpose of planning in relation to social, economic and environmental processes (e.g. Is planning a centralised regulator or a pro-active enabler of economic growth?).
- There is a need to devise a methodology to encourage local authorities to monitor and evaluate the wider impact brought by the changing planning system.
- It is important to find out the impact of the planning e-portal over joined up government.
- Need to find out more about the operation and impact of Local Development Frameworks, to identify sub-regional or local areas to be subject to LDFs, to research the relationship of Community Strategies to LDFs, and to understand LDFs in relation to urban design

More general issues that were in need of further development were:

- The growing importance of electronic connectivity and the telecoms revolution;
- The nature and extent of community involvement in planning, visioning, mapping etc, and a particular need to understand how communities might be involved in Regional Spatial Strategies;
- The impact of the new governance arrangements and the extent to which more decentralised forms of decision-making, as evident in some European cities, may be an explanatory factor in comparing the varied performance and competitiveness of different cities;
- The importance of the relationship between land-use and transportation and the extent to which this could and needs to be accorded greater priority in decision-making;
- The success or failure of alternative planning approaches evident in Europe and elsewhere;
- The development of the concept of core cities, and even market towns, should be subject to analysis;
- The need to conceptualise urban and rural and to understand current and future relationships;
- The issue of urban design was raised in the context of the need to understand planners relationship with people's need to buy into an

urban lifestyle, lack of joined-up strategic design awareness in areas of large-scale, high density development, and more research into the need for legislation on aspects of interior design, such as sound proofing.

There was also a feeling that more work could be directed at understanding how people might make different choices concerning many of the above issues following different policy options.

## **2. Research priorities for the Office**

### **2.1 What are the priority areas of research for the Office? Which research areas, identified from (1), are appropriate for the ODPM research programme?**

This was not specifically covered in most groups, but it was noted that,

- On the one hand, the issue of high and low demand housing areas, and the tendency to plan for a migratory pattern that includes the move towards increasing demand in the South East, has not thus far been tested by fully analysing the evidence that is already available. This was high priority, not simply for the currency of the issue, but also for responses which might be needed regionally to halt or push migration, or enable growth in low demand areas.
- On the other hand, there was a feeling from one group that the current ODPM research programme is already heavily weighted towards housing and that some people would wish to see a broader, more general, planning focus in research. Examples might include the importance of core cities / city-regions and regional development and governance agenda and strategic relevance of Regional Spatial Strategies. What is happening and what would we like things to happen?

In this general sense, there was a feeling that ODPM sponsored research should be addressing experimental actions and innovative thinking, but also seeking to gain more understanding of different techniques for research in different contexts.

## **3. Influencing other research agendas**

### **3.1 Which other organisations should be taking planning-related research forward?**

Most groups did not deal with this subject at length, but the following observations are recorded:

- There is a general need to urge the ESRC to give more weight to planning research, perhaps through a joint research programme. In the past, there have been joint research programmes such as 'Cities', but it was not focused particularly upon planning.
- It was pointed out that some agencies, such as JRF, do not involve themselves in some issues because of the scale of the issue, an example being regional spatiality. For this reason it was appropriate for, say, the ODPM and DTI to sponsor a joint regional strategy research programme.

#### **4. Other general points**

A number of general points were made as to how the ODPM might clarify options surrounding its research agenda. These included:

- Understanding the importance of resources - finance, co-funding and working with other organisations (Research Councils, RDAs, EU, JRF).
- Important to evaluate 'where we are now' and 'where we want to be' - this could be achieved by a number of think pieces / reviews to enable ODPM and Network to stand back and understand forward issues especially about what policy interventions are most appropriate.
- Spatial aspects are always an important consideration - physical infrastructure, land use, environmental capacity (evaluation through a multi-level GIS), sustainable development, and so on.
- Importance of planning obligations - policy impacts of S106s - need blue skies research on PPS1, tools for monitoring and research evaluation regimes. Linkage with the Planning Portal.
- Encourage the study of comparative practice (European, International) to include differential policy practice.
- Community involvement, participation and implications for practitioners are important.

#### **5. Key 'good practice' messages for ODPM research**

- The need to have a focus on recent changes (timescale and type).
- Making good use of past research
- The need to develop a better data sharing and cataloguing system, so that research can be built upon previous findings.