



# ROMSEY & DISTRICT SOCIETY

## Comments on South East Plan consultation

### 1 Introduction

The Romsey & District Society (R&DS) is a civic society serving Romsey and its surrounding parishes for over thirty years. We have about 1,000 members, and take an active interest in planning, environment, countryside and social issues affecting the area.

Romsey is a historic market town on the Test dating back to a seventh century settlement. Our traditions are based on the Abbey and its 12th century Abbey church, on milling (with at one time nearly a dozen mills powered by the river), fly-fishing, and more recently on brewing. There are a number of Tudor houses and ancient inns throughout the area. Broadlands, the home of Lord Palmerston and later of Lord Louis Mountbatten, lies on the southern edge of the town. Romsey acts as a centre, and literally as a market, for the surrounding villages of Braishfield, Ampfield, North Baddesley, Nursling, Wellow, Awbridge, Michelmersh, Timsbury, Kings Somborne, Lockerley, Mottisfont, Houghton, Broughton, and East & West Tytherley.

The R&DS is not, and never has been, opposed to all development in and around Romsey, but we have always striven to ensure that such development should preserve what is best about its essential character as a market town. Like all market towns today, our individuality is both extremely precious to us and at the same time under threat from the many pressures towards uniformity in modern life.

We therefore approach the South East Plan, as we have approached successive County Structure Plans and Borough Local Plans over the last thirty years, in a positive frame of mind, looking for opportunities to promote our vision of Romsey as a proud, historic, prosperous, distinctive, and dynamic community based on solid and continuing values that have been built up over centuries.

#### 1.1 Structure of our comments

In section 2 we deal with the basic foundations of the Plan, and give our objections to three aspects of them. Next (section 3) we discuss the detailed housing and growth options, and spatial strategies for the South Hampshire Sub-region. We end with our overall conclusions.

### 2 The background, assumptions, objectives and approach of the Plan

We recognise and accept most of the drivers of the overall Plan, and in particular its basic assumption that the region as a whole should generate good economic growth throughout the plan period. We recognise also that the cities of Portsmouth and Southampton, together with Fareham and Gosport, have both a need and a capability for growth rates higher than the regional average. We agree with many of the focus-points of the plan, for example its dependency on infrastructure investment such as improved transport links, its greatly increased emphasis on affordable housing, and its determination to exploit brownfield sites for housing wherever possible.

But we have three serious reservations:

- There is a disappointing omission that seems to us crucial for Romsey specifically: the seeming lack of recognition of its status as a historic market town.
- Arising from that, we wish to question most vigorously one of the plan's assumptions: the inclusion of Romsey in the South Hampshire Sub-region.
- There seems to us a basic flaw in the Plan's overall approach: the 'top-down' imposition of growth, infrastructure, housing and other targets on the region and its constituent parts without a proper consideration of the capacity to absorb them, or the consequences that would follow. Unlike the first two points above, this is not specific to Romsey.

We cover these reservations in the next three paragraphs.

### **2.1 Romsey as a Market Town**

As explained in para 1.0 above, Romsey is a historic market town, with all that follows in terms of character, atmosphere, layout, architecture, environment, independence, relations with neighbouring villages and towns, etc. We are part of the Hampshire County Council Market Towns Project; we are involved in carrying out the market towns' 'Healthcheck' initiative jointly funded by the Countryside Agency, SEEDA, and others; the Countryside Agency's nationwide Action for Market Towns organisation selected Romsey to hold its 2004 Annual Conference; the Romsey & District Society is leading the *Look at Romsey* project to develop a 'whole town' Design Statement – we believe we are the only town in England to be doing so.

But we find scant recognition of our status in the Plan. On the contrary, we are specifically excluded from section D7's focus, by its insistence on talking about 'small market towns', defining them by reference to an upper population limit of 10,000 (Romsey has about 14,000). This failure to consider the needs of non-small market towns is extremely unhelpful (generally, not just to Romsey), and relates neither to the initiatives discussed above nor to the ODPM's overall policy focus. It seems to be the opposite of 'joined-up government'.

### **2.2 The geography of the South Hampshire Sub-region**

The South Hampshire Sub-region's rationale is primarily the needs of Portsmouth and Southampton, with consequent focus on Fareham and Gosport too. Parts of the area are seen as in need of regeneration, and the whole as an area of economic opportunity, meriting a growth rate above the regional average. So far, so good.

But absolutely nowhere have we seen any justification for including Romsey just inside its extreme western boundary. We do not feel part of this sub-region. We are separated geographically by the M3 and by woodland and countryside. In local government terms we look north, to Andover, not south or east. In character we are quite unlike anywhere else in the sub-region – we feel more affinity with the New Forest in that respect. We do not want our growth rate, housing target, or infrastructure investment to be determined by the needs of Portsmouth and/or Southampton – we want them to be determined by the equally legitimate needs of Romsey.

### **2.3 The imposition of targets**

Of course in most walks of life where targets are to be set, they have ultimately to be determined 'top-down', and planning is one of them. But for that to work properly the targets must be related closely to a thorough analysis of what the activity concerned is capable of achieving. What changes would be required for the

targets to be met? What problems would these changes bring, and would the benefits substantially outweigh them?

We find no evidence of such a thorough analysis here. We feel that this methodological flaw is so serious that this draft of the Plan should be withdrawn pending a bottom-up 'capacity analysis' – a detailed review of the consequences for the different parts of the region of adopting the various growth and development targets put forward in the Plan.

It is true that the Plan identifies infrastructure investment (transport, schools, etc) as a dependency, but our fear is that once the high growth targets (eg for housing) have been agreed, the importance of that dependency will be lost sight of.

And even if that fear is unfounded, our point is that before adopting the Plan we need a prior appraisal of the effects of such infrastructure investment on the environment and character of a historic market town like Romsey. We are concerned about transport, and simply cannot see how the town and the surrounding area could cope with much more traffic (we suffer in particular from low bridges incompatible with many HGVs). We are concerned about more building on or near the floodplains of the Test, and the effect all building around here has of increasing the rate of run-off of surface water. We are concerned about water resources, their adequacy and their conservation. We are concerned about waste generation and disposal: many existing targets on recycling, though welcome in principle, seem to us to be so challenging as to be unrealistic.

Although the Plan refers to these issues, nothing in it reassures us that they can or will be resolved robustly enough to enable the proposed growth figures.

### **3 Growth and housing options**

In this section we give our views on some options set out in the draft Plan.

#### **3.1 Development options - Plan overall**

For the reasons given in para 2.3 above, we do not believe any of these three options should be chosen without a proper capacity analysis.

#### **3.2 Distribution options**

The logic of the designation of certain areas (such as the South Hampshire Sub-region) as being in need of regeneration, points clearly to the 'Sharper focus' distribution option. However for us that in turn increases the logic, and importance, of our view that Romsey should not be part of the South Hampshire Sub-region. No-one has suggested that Romsey is in need of regeneration in that sense. We wish to grow no faster than the average for the South East Region as a whole.

#### **3.3 Spatial options - South Hampshire Sub-region**

Given our strong views about Romsey being outside this sub-region, the only point we want to make is that if option B is adopted none of the four proposed 'Strategic Development Areas' of 5,000 to 10,000 dwellings should impinge on the existing strategic gap between Southampton and Romsey.

### **4 Other comments**

We particularly applaud paras 1.2(ii) and 1.5 in section D7, on the subject of Built Excellence. In our experience, mediocrity in the layout and/or architecture of new developments is a significant contributor to people's disillusionment with the whole planning process.

## **5 Conclusion**

The Plan does not address the region's capacity. It does not address Romsey's needs, or its capacity. It tries to impose a grand design over the whole of a region that is in reality far from homogeneous. Perhaps recognising this, it has created the South Hampshire sub-region as one needing special treatment but has quite wrongly tried to shoehorn Romsey into it. The result could be the erosion of our character, developed over the centuries. We ask for a rethink.

*Romsey, 8 April 2005*

*Comments or questions on any aspect of this document should be addressed to:*

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