

# Even Regions, Greener Growth

CPRE's proposals for an environmental and land-use dimension to the Government's 'new regional policy', so that support for more even regional economic development promotes urban renaissance and puts an end to sprawl.

CPRE



Your countryside  
your voice



‘The economic differences between UK regions are clear and indicate that a winners’ circle is emerging, with some regions keeping up and staying in touch, while others slip further behind... It is time to reverse what has in some cases been decades of under performance and decline and to put in place policies which will widen the winners’ circle.’

‘We need a new regional policy to make regions fit to compete in the knowledge economy, building up the strengths of the weakest regions.’

STEPHEN BYERS MP, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, 15 November 2000, announcing the Government’s ‘new regional policy’.

## Introduction

The stark difference in economic performance within and between the English regions is now widely recognised as a reality and a threat to prosperity. Rather than the situation improving, there are clear signs that the gap is significantly widening.<sup>1</sup> This divide goes wider than economic performance, extending to educational achievement and the health of the population. There are also serious environmental consequences which have often been overlooked. Urban decay and population loss in the north and midlands goes hand in hand with sprawling development and congestion in the south and east. This not only damages the quality of life in all regions, but saps economic growth and undermines economic potential. In all regions, migration from the cities to the surrounding rural areas fuels urban decline and puts pressure on the countryside.

The Government wants to raise the economic performance of the English regions, to reduce the regional divides and to raise national productivity by widening the 'winners' circle' of successful regions. Yet, in all regions, a crude drive for growth will exacerbate the threat to the countryside and undermine urban renaissance. A new approach is required which builds on the cities as the drivers of regional prosperity, tackles urban decay and traffic growth, protects the countryside and deals more effectively with the barriers to investment outside the prosperous south and east of England. This report shows how the economic objectives of the 'new regional policy' can be reconciled with the Government's wider environmental and land use objectives to improve the quality of life in all regions. ●

## Summary

The regional economic divide has environmental and land use consequences which undermine quality of life, hold back prosperity in all regions and may exacerbate the divide itself.

Traffic growth and development pressure on the countryside are both particularly acute in the prosperous south and east and, elsewhere, slower rates of growth co-exist with urban decay and high rates of migration from the cities.

The Government has adopted a 'new regional policy' to address these regional economic disparities, but this policy has yet to address the environmental and land use dimension. Urban renaissance and countryside protection need to be adopted as primary objectives for the new regional policy if it is to succeed in improving economic performance and quality of life together on both sides of the economic divide.

An even-handed approach for all regions is likely simply to exacerbate the problem of economic disparities between regions and will miss the opportunity to link the pattern of growth with land use and environmental objectives. Disparities should be reduced more quickly and with greater certainty by improving the relative attractiveness of less prosperous regions, helping some firms to relocate outside the south and east and focusing development where it best meets urban renaissance and countryside protection objectives.

The absence of a clear or explicit *inter*-regional dimension – co-ordinating initiatives across regional boundaries – is a key weakness in the Government's new approach to regional policy. In particular, it limits the scope for encouraging businesses to locate outside the south and east. The Government's new regional policy should be backed by a clear statement of the preferred balance of spatial development across the country, and mechanisms at a national level to resolve inter-regional competition for

major developments and assess the spatial impact of national Government policies and spending decisions.

The Government needs to develop a clear vision for the economy of the south and east and its role in the national economy, which discourages land-hungry and traffic-generating development in the economic 'hotspots', and accepts that the pursuit of maximum economic growth in the south and east at the expense of other regions is inconsistent with the goal of more even economic growth across the country and supporting an urban renaissance.

To prevent development pressure simply being transferred from greenfield sites in the south to greenfield sites in the north, the concept of 'discerning development' needs to be central to the new regional policy. Discerning development is where growth is sought through promoting indigenous skills, adding value to the local economy, making efficient use of land, and through the provision of targeted training. This approach needs to be endorsed by central Government and taken forward by the Regional Development Agencies, Government Regional Offices and Regional Planning Bodies.

The Government's new regional policy should be backed by an Action Plan setting out action at a national level which will lower the barriers to investment in the less prosperous regions and make it easier for businesses to operate from previously developed sites.

CPRE is calling on the Government to develop its new regional policy so that it:

- recognises the regional economic divide has an environmental and land use dimension;
- incorporates environmental protection, land use and urban renaissance objectives which guide the use of public investment and other support; and
- supports action at a national, regional and local level to make previously developed land in regions outside the south and east more attractive to investors. ●

## The regional divide: the environmental dimension

While talk of a crude north/south economic divide oversimplifies the issue, a picture clearly emerges of a divide between the prosperous south and east and the rest of the country. This divide goes well beyond economic performance and health and educational achievement. Traffic growth and development pressure on the countryside are both particularly acute in the prosperous south and east and, elsewhere, slower rates of growth co-exist with urban decay and high rates of migration from the cities.

It is important to understand that these economic and environmental patterns are linked. The lack of investment in the north and midlands encourages people – particularly skilled labour – to move out of the cities in search of a better place to live, and economic buoyancy in the south and east creates enormous demand for land for industrial and commercial development. Linked to this, more and more land is being developed for housing in the economic hotspots as the working population increases and greater affluence leads to greater demand. Transport infrastructure in the south and east is stretched beyond capacity, making journeys to work increasingly difficult, and making it increasingly difficult to run a business efficiently.

There is, of course, poverty and wealth in all regions, just as there is congestion and sprawl in the ‘north’ and urban decline in the ‘south’, but the overall pattern at the regional scale is clear. Disparities within regions do not make the national divide any less real or important.

These patterns may be self-reinforcing. Many urban areas are caught in a ‘cycle of decline’, where lack of investment and population loss from the cities reduces the resources available to local authorities. Investment in transport infrastructure, urban regeneration and basic services such as schools and healthcare may be further reduced as a result of continuing population loss. This adds to the incentive for those who can to move out in search of a better place to live.

**KEY POINT: The regional economic divide has environmental and land use consequences which undermine quality of life, hold back prosperity in all regions and may exacerbate the divide itself. ●**

### BEAUTY BRINGS PROSPERITY

In all regions, urban sprawl and road building in the countryside reduces quality of life and will undermine economic prosperity where it makes an area a less attractive place to live or set up business. *Regional Planning Guidance for the South East* (March 2000) recognises the need to maintain environmental quality in the interests of the continuing success of the region’s economy. It states that:

*‘A high quality environment is essential to the future prosperity of the South East.’<sup>2</sup>*

The Regional Development Agency for the South East region shares this concern:

*‘The countryside of the South East is one of its major economic assets. Its conservation is integral to the Region’s competitiveness.’<sup>3</sup>*

and

*‘To preserve its competitive edge, the South East must therefore integrate economic development with environmental quality, conservation of the countryside, and urban renaissance.’<sup>4</sup>*

And in the urban context, the draft Spatial Development Strategy for London recognises that:

*‘Maintaining this environmental and social quality is vital to London’s success.’<sup>5</sup>*

The Government’s new regional policy needs to recognise that pursuing economic growth at the expense of environmental quality is short-sighted and ultimately self-defeating.

## Gross Domestic Product (workplace basis) per head

(UK=100)



Source: Regional Accounts, ONS, 2001

## Forecast traffic growth on rural roads (%) 1996 – 2031



Source: Traffic Trauma or Tranquillity? CPRE, September 1999

## Time taken to travel to work (minutes), autumn 2000



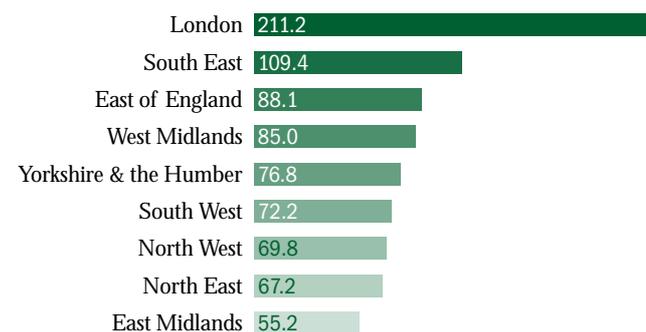
Source: Regional Competitiveness Indicators (ONS, March 2001) Indicator 13, Table 13(c)

## Mean stress on roads (%) (1998)

Source: Regional Competitiveness Indicators (ONS, March 2001) Indicator 13, Table 13(d) Caveat<sup>1</sup>

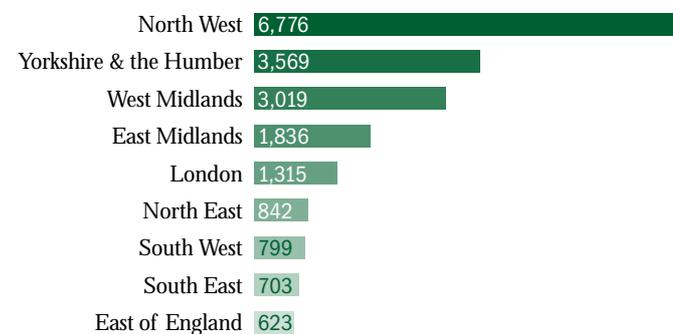
## Rental cost index of Type 1 office accommodation (spring, 2001)

(Index Great Britain=100)



Source: Regional Competitiveness Indicators (ONS, September 2001) Indicator 14, Table 14(b)

## Previously developed urban land (hectares) by region (1993)



Source: Derelict Land Survey, DoE, 1993

<sup>1</sup> While we accept that fluctuations in this indicator do correlate with different road conditions, CPRE does not consider that the indicator is an appropriate basis for assessing the success of public policy. Policy should aim to reduce traffic levels as well as congestion, and, moreover, the way in which the indicator is measured may encourage an approach which simply promotes higher vehicle speeds.

## The Government's 'new regional policy'

The Government wants to see the economic disparities between regions reduced. It is trying to help other regions 'catch up' with the prosperous south and east through a 'bottom-up' approach which focuses on allowing all regions – including through the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) – greater freedom and resources to concentrate on their own priorities (see box below). This approach is welcome but addresses only part of the problem.

### THE GOVERNMENT'S 'NEW' REGIONAL POLICY

*'This new regional policy is based on two clear principles:*

- first, we need to strengthen the building blocks for economic growth in all regions: enterprise, skills, innovation, higher education and scientific excellence;*
- and second, our approach must be bottom up, not top down. The role of Government should be to enable regional and local initiatives to work.'*<sup>6</sup>

STEPHEN BYERS MP, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, November 2000.

The new regional policy can be summarised as:

- an overall increase in the level of funding to the RDAs;
- a disproportionate increase in funding for the northern RDAs;
- an increase in the freedom with which the RDAs may distribute funding streams between programmes.

There are other funding mechanisms by which the Government may influence the pattern of development across the regions – notably Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) – but these are allocated either on a case-by-case basis, or according to the pattern of regional 'need' as defined by the Index of Local Deprivation. The distribution of most 'regionalised' public funding streams has not been explicitly influenced by the new regional policy.

As well as promoting economic growth, the Government's new regional policy needs to respond to the environmental challenge created by regional economic disparities and needs to be seen as a policy framework for public funding streams beyond the RDAs' budgets.

The Government's new regional policy is essentially about enhancing national prosperity by realising the latent economic potential of the less prosperous regions. Even if successful, the Government's approach would not take the pressure off greenfield sites in the south and east, and there is no explicit linkage with urban renaissance in the north or elsewhere. A key issue is whether the chosen approach to economic development sees the environment as an opportunity or a constraint: is competitiveness to be achieved by accelerating the urban renaissance, protecting the quality of the countryside, and making our cities more vibrant, liveable places to do business? Or is it to be achieved by throwing greenfield land at the problem, allowing urban decline to continue, expanding road capacity and sacrificing the countryside? The new regional policy needs to make it clear which is the Government's preferred option. Consistent with the Urban and Rural White Papers, the new regional policy needs explicitly to focus on delivering the urban renaissance and protecting the countryside, and go beyond a crude policy of growth in GNP.

In the 1999 White Paper on sustainable development, the Prime Minister recognised the need to integrate economic and environmental objectives:

*'focusing solely on economic growth risks ignoring the impact – both good and bad – on people and on the environment.'*<sup>7</sup>

This approach, however, has yet to be robustly reflected in the new regional policy.

The Chancellor's 2001 Pre-Budget Statement was accompanied by the publication of a report<sup>8</sup> on the productivity of the regions, which stated that:

*'any regional economic policy must be focussed on raising the performance of the weakest regions, rather than the simple redistribution of existing economic activity.'*

and

*'Growth in the economy depends heavily on investment in physical capital and infrastructure.'*

This approach may bode ill for the 'weakest regions' unless it is linked strongly with environmental and land use objectives.

### THE NEW REGIONAL POLICY – DELIVERING OBJECTIVES FOR TOWN AND COUNTRY?

The new regional policy needs to focus on countryside protection and delivering an urban renaissance. It needs to recognise and deliver the objectives of the Urban and Rural White Papers. The Urban White Paper is a statement of Government commitment to:

*‘encourage people to remain in and move back to urban areas... both for the benefit of our urban areas and to relieve pressure for development in the countryside.’<sup>9</sup>*

The Rural White Paper seeks to:

*‘sustain and enhance the distinctive environment economy and social fabric of the English countryside for the benefit of all.’*

The assumption underlying the suggested approach, however, are questioned elsewhere in the report itself:

*‘Large-scale public infrastructure investments, despite providing a short-term demand boost, have frequently failed to stimulate long-term regional economic growth.’*

Clearly, the notion that economic performance should be increased by throwing infrastructure and greenfield land at the problem needs to be critically examined.

**KEY POINT: The Government’s new regional policy has yet to address the environmental and land use dimension to regional economic disparities. Urban renaissance and countryside protection need to be adopted as primary objectives for the new regional policy if it is to succeed in improving economic performance and quality of life together on both sides of the economic divide. ●**

### THE ‘ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION’

The ‘environmental dimension’ to the Government’s new regional policy remains elusive. Ed Balls, Chief Economic Advisor to the Treasury, published a pamphlet in 2000 which recognises that the new regional policy can promote the recycling of previously developed urban sites through economic growth. It states that the *‘new approach [to delivering balanced and sustainable economic growth] required new policies to... protect the environment.’<sup>10</sup>*

This is a welcome step in the right direction, but has not yet been reflected in Government statements on its new regional policy, or, indeed, in practical action.

In responding to this issue, Minister for Trade, Richard Caborn MP, said:

*‘it is partly because of [congestion and industrial sprawl in the south and east] that it is so important to have an environmental and land use dimension to Regional policy. We look to Regional Planning Guidance to articulate this.’<sup>11</sup> [emphasis added]*

The ‘regional policy’ referred to by the Minister appears to be one which is developed within the region itself, and not the Government’s national view.

## Growing together?

The Government's approach to pursuing more even economic growth depends on continued increases in GNP, with a greater contribution coming from the northern and midlands regions. The problem with this approach is that it is not clear how the less prosperous regions may 'catch up' with the south and east, and there is no reference to taking the current level of economic development pressure off the south and east.

The 2001 Labour Party manifesto sets out the Government's approach thus:

*'Balanced and sustainable economic growth depends on every region developing its capacity to the full.'*<sup>12</sup>

The Report accompanying the 2001 Pre-Budget Report stated that:

*'attempts to address regional [economic] differentials must be done by a process of levelling-up, not levelling down. An effective long-term regional economic policy should therefore focus on addressing market and co-ordination failures to increase the national growth rate.'*<sup>13</sup>

The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott MP puts it thus:

*'Regional imbalances – within or between regions – hold back national economic performance. Regionally-balanced growth, led by the regions themselves, is not only desirable in its own right – but also an essential element of the Government's approach to raising productivity.'*<sup>14</sup>

Not only does the Government's approach to reducing economic disparity between regions depend on a very significant growth in the UK economy, it presents very significant challenges for the currently less prosperous regions to out-perform the south and east in economic terms in the face of their inherent advantages:

- a wealthier population;
- a greater population;

- easier access to European markets;
- a pool of skilled labour in modern, high-tech industries;
- the kudos associated with the regions' economic status.

Further, the RDAs are all effectively in competition with each other and the ones which started with the greatest advantage are likely simply to build on that advantage, exacerbating the problem of interregional economic disparities. Given these inherent and structural advantages in some regions, it is not clear how an approach which seeks to maximise growth in *all* regions will result in an evening out of the pattern of prosperity across the country. This is a major flaw in the Government's rationale.

The Government's approach appears to ignore the opportunities for a *redistribution* of economic activity. This is despite the Deputy Prime Minister's acknowledgement that evenness *per se* in the pattern of growth is *'desirable in its own right'*. The benefits of more even economic growth to the national economy – even without an increase in national productivity – are recognised in the 1999 Cabinet Office report on regional issues *Sharing the Nation's Prosperity*, and go wider than promoting urban renaissance and relieving pressure in the south and east:

*'The prospect of stable growth with low inflation is partly dependent on the balance of economic activity between the various regions and nations of the UK.'*<sup>15</sup>

The reasons given include that, for example, unemployment becomes less of a burden on the national economy when it is more evenly dispersed within the country.<sup>16</sup> There is, however, no acknowledgement from the Government that the economic development that currently tends to be attracted to the south and east ought to be encouraged to locate elsewhere. Such an approach is, however, to be commended because it

would help the less prosperous regions to ‘catch up’ economically, would help reduce environmental pressure on the south and east, and could be harnessed to contribute to urban renaissance.

Ed Balls, the Government’s Chief Economic Advisor, accepts that a more level playing field is not an unrealistic objective:

*‘as communications technology increases the mobility and the speed of integration, there are strong attractions to locate in cities and regions outside the South East’<sup>17</sup>*

Businesses are already being forced out of the south and east, either due to rising rental costs or the cost of housing for employees. This outcome is not necessarily a bad thing since it forces firms to look further afield and reduces regional economic disparities. It should not, however, depend on a crude price mechanism and the attendant problems of congestion and loss of quality of life. There may be scope for the Government to encourage and better manage the out-migration of those firms and public sector institutions in the south and east which do not wish or need to be there, and helping them to relocate on previously developed sites in other regions.

**KEY POINT: An even-handed approach for all regions is likely simply to exacerbate the problem of economic disparities between regions and will miss the opportunity to link the pattern of growth with land use and environmental objectives. Disparities should be reduced more quickly and with greater certainty by improving the relative attractiveness of less prosperous regions, helping some firms to relocate outside the south and east and focusing development where it best meets urban renaissance and countryside protection objectives. ●**

## A national strategy for the regions

The Government is encouraging ‘bottom-up’ solutions to economic under-performance in the regions. This is welcome insofar as it goes and will allow some of the root causes of economic problems – such as addressing skills shortages – to be addressed at source. It is not, however, sufficient to rely on policies at the regional or local level to manage the pattern of development at the national scale and to steer development to those regions best able to accommodate it on previously developed sites. Most individual planning applications, for example, are assessed on their own merits, not on whether they support or undermine a preferred pattern of spatial development across the country. The competition between RDAs and the inherent advantages of some regions will exacerbate the regional divide.

Commitment and action is needed at the *national* level to entice land-hungry investment away from greenfield sites in economic ‘hotspots’ and across regional boundaries towards areas most in need of regeneration. In the South East, RPG and the strategy of the RDA is aimed at taking the pressure off the ‘overheated’ area to the west of the region and redirecting it towards the run-down Thames Gateway in the east. A similar approach needs to be applied *across* regional boundaries, but a policy framework at the national level is needed to take it forward. That policy framework is missing.

The new regional policy makes very little reference to this *inter-regional* dimension. This is a key weakness in the Government’s approach. Beyond a general aspiration for more even economic growth, the Government has offered no clear national ‘spatial’ perspective. Skewing RDA funding towards the north and the midlands is the only ‘national’ element of the Government’s new regional policy, but even here the funds are not necessarily required to be spent on urban renaissance.

If the pattern of economic and housing development across England is going to change, then there is a need for a clear expression of intent by the Government that this is an objective of national policy. Such an objective can be called upon to support restraint in areas under development pressure and to encourage investment in the pro-active initiatives.

Interestingly, in its White Paper on productivity, the Government has hinted at the need for a ‘bigger picture’ policy framework, although it is not explained: *‘the best mechanisms for [strengthening the essential building blocks of growth – innovation, skills and the development of enterprise] are likely to be based in the regions themselves, and so national Government must enable regional and local initiatives to work by providing the necessary resources within a national framework.’*<sup>18</sup>

The Government should set out its position on this ‘national framework’. That position should include a clear statement that the polarisation of housing and economic development pressure in the south and east is undesirable, and that the balance needs to be shifted towards previously

developed urban land elsewhere. Mechanisms need to be put in place to support this approach by ensuring that major development proposals, Government funding decisions and other national policy initiatives are consistent with the national perspective. Two such mechanisms are discussed below.

### ‘GEOGRAPHY-PROOFING’

A national perspective and an environmental dimension to the new regional policy requires some mechanism for assessing the impact that other Government policies might have on the regions. CPRE therefore welcomed the statement by Lord Falconer, Minister of State at the Cabinet Office with responsibilities for the Government

## NEW REGIONAL POLICY – A STEER FROM THE GOVERNMENT?

Despite the long-standing desire of Government to promote the fortunes of the less prosperous regions, important opportunities continue to be missed for steering major employment-generating businesses to where they are most needed:

### Synchrotron science project – Didcot, Oxfordshire

In 2000, the Government announced that a major, £200 million scientific research project would be awarded to the Rutherford-Appleton laboratory in Didcot, Oxfordshire, rather than at the leading research facility at Daresby in Cheshire. The decision to build the synchrotron particle accelerator and X-ray source in Oxfordshire led to vociferous complaints from North West MPs and MEPS, who claimed that the decision threatened to undermine the North West’s fragile research base. Despite being the only major publicly-funded research facility in the north of England, the Government was only able to give assurances that the Daresby facility would remain operational for seven years following the decision. The Wellcome Trust – who provided much of the funding for the project – were subsequently reported as claiming that they were pushed by the Government into supporting the Oxfordshire bid, despite their own preference for the Cheshire alternative.

### Rolls Royce – Chichester, West Sussex

In June 2001, BMW AG were given planning permission

for a Rolls Royce car plant on a greenfield site near Chichester and less than a kilometre from the South Downs AONB. This followed a reduction in the capacity and loss of jobs at Rolls Royce’s plant in Derby in the East Midlands and therefore contributed to a ‘North-South’ drift of employment opportunities. The application was contrary to the West Sussex Structure Plan and the Chichester Local Plan, and at least two alternative sites were available on previously developed land within fifteen miles of Chichester. Despite these issues, Government Office for the South East refused to call the planning application in and refused to give reasons for not doing so.

### Meteorological Office – Exeter, Devon

One way in which the Government acted to improve the economic performance of regions outside the south and east has been to re-locate major Government institutions to the less prosperous regions. This kind of action, however, has not always met with the objectives of avoiding greenfield development. For example, in November 2000, the Meteorological Office announced that it was re-locating its national headquarters from Berkshire (South East region) to Exeter, in the South West region. The chosen site is a greenfield site to the north of the town. This is the kind of initiative which should be guided by a clear policy framework which ensures that such development promotes urban renaissance rather than damages the countryside and increases traffic levels.

Regional Offices, in discussing the role of the Regional Co-ordination Unit<sup>ii</sup>, that:

*'before policies are announced – not all policies but those which impact regionally or locally – there has to be a consideration of what their effect will be on the regions.'*<sup>19</sup>

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Stephen Byers MP, made a similar commitment in announcing the new regional policy:

*'In the past most policies did not take account of regional differences. That will change. We will now look at the regional dimension to our policies on issues like innovation, science, trade, industrial sectors, small firms, electronic commerce and venture capital. All of them have a regional element we need to address.'*<sup>20</sup>

### REGENERATION/INVESTMENT LINK

The scope for urban regeneration has very little influence on the way Government money for economic regeneration is distributed among the English regions. The national target for a mere 17% of existing previously-developed land to be brought back into productive use by 2010<sup>24</sup> seems unambitious, and could be increased if it were to penetrate more widely in Government investment decisions. There is some way to go, however:

- there is very little consideration of the availability of previously developed land and buildings in the distribution of public investment. For example, the amount of derelict land in a region is one of seven equally weighted factors within a formula which determines 80% of the Land and Property Programme for the RDAs for 2001/02;<sup>25</sup> and
- in determining the allocation of funds for economic and physical development regeneration initiatives (such as the Regional Innovation Fund) in 2001, no direct account was taken by DTI of the distribution of previously developed land.<sup>26</sup>

The Government's new regional policy – with an environmental and land use dimension – should provide a policy framework for the distribution of public investment between the regions in such a way that the potential for promoting urban regeneration is maximised, and additional pressure on greenfield sites is avoided.

These are rare but useful references to the need for 'geography-proofing' Government policy. Unfortunately, that commitment has not been followed through in respect of the public investment in the regions and the potential of the Regional Co-ordination Unit in this regard has not been realised. In response to a Parliamentary Question in May 2001, DETR Minister Beverley Hughes MP said that:

*'The Regional Co-ordination Unit has not assessed any initiatives which have included regional selective assistance or funding for the regional development agencies.'*<sup>21</sup>

Nor is there any reference to assessing the geographical impact of the Government's spending priorities in the terms of reference of the next Spending Review beyond a passing reference to 'town and country'.

### CLEARING HOUSE FOR MAJOR DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

No clear mechanism is operating for making decisions about the best locations for inward investment and other major developments for the interests of the country as a whole. The result is that, despite official advice to the contrary,<sup>22</sup> the RDAs are effectively in competition with each other for inward investment and other public and private investment. For example, all of the English RDAs outside London are required to adopt targets for attracting inward investment.<sup>23</sup> Where the RDAs are tempted to enter into 'bidding wars' with each other, development may end up in whichever region offers the greatest financial subsidy (implying poor value for taxpayers' money), not that which best meets wider policy objectives such as urban renaissance, the promotion of economic 'clusters', and reducing regional economic disparity. In the pursuit of inter-regional competition, the RDAs and local authorities may be tempted to 'throw land' at the problem of attracting inward investment, making it difficult to market previously developed sites and reducing the availability of sites for other kinds of development.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Regional Co-ordination Unit of the Cabinet Office was set up in 2000 to co-ordinate the delivery of departmental priorities through the Government Regional Offices.*

### R&D – DRIVING THE NEW REGIONAL POLICY FORWARD?

Research and development (R&D) in science and technology is one of the most powerful agents of regional economic regeneration and competitiveness. The need for the Government to have a strategy for the geographical distribution of public investment in R&D is likely to be critical factor in promoting the economic fortunes of the English regions. In light of the Government's commitment to evenness of growth, it is therefore surprising that 59% of Government R&D expenditure in England goes to the three most prosperous regions – London, the South East and East of England regions. That situation has been exacerbated by the awarding in 2000 of the Wellcome Trust synchrotron project to Oxfordshire rather than to Cheshire in the North West region (see box page 9). Further, in 1998, manufacturing businesses invested over ten times as much in R&D in the South East – £1.9 billion – as in the North East – £164 million.<sup>27</sup>

Regional breakdown of Government R&D expenditure in the Business, Government and Higher Education sectors, 1999 (£million)<sup>28</sup>



The distribution of Government investment in R&D – a major influence on economic development – should be adjusted so as to better promote economic regeneration in those areas best able to accommodate it on previously developed sites.

**KEY POINT:** The absence of a clear or explicit inter-regional dimension is a key weakness in the Government's new approach to regional policy. In particular, it limits the scope for encouraging businesses to locate outside the south and east. The Government's new regional policy should be backed by a clear statement of the preferred balance of spatial development across the country, and mechanisms at a national level to resolve inter-regional competition for major developments and assess the spatial impact of national Government policies and spending decisions. ●

## The ‘engine of the UK economy’?

The hugely important role of the south and east in the national economy presents the Government with a difficult issue in attempting to reduce inter-regional economic disparities. There is an unresolved tension between building on economic success in the most prosperous regions, and helping the other regions to ‘catch up’.

Where the emphasis is on building on success in the south and east, reducing the economic disparities between regions will be an elusive goal. Attempts to reduce disparities between regions by shifting the focus of public investment in the economy will apparently be met with strong resistance from some quarters:

*‘The South East of England is the engine of the UK economy and the Regional Assembly has always argued that the whole country’s prosperity depends on our region’s continuing success... In short, you don’t speed up the train by slowing down the engine.’*

DAVID SHAKESPEARE, Chairman of the South East England Regional Assembly

*‘The North already receives huge extra funding through Assisted Area status and Objective 1, but on top of this the Regional Development Agency receives only £12 per head of population in the South [East] while the North East receives £58. The South East remains the central driver of the national economy and it makes little sense to so dramatically under-fund both its investment and its public services.’*

SANDY BRUCE-LOCKHART, Leader of Kent County Council

*‘it is likely that London’s economy will continue to grow more rapidly than the UK average... The London Plan will therefore consider how to accommodate significantly greater demand for jobs, homes, goods, movement and services... The fundamental choice set out in this document is to accommodate the projected growth of population and prosperity’*

From *Towards the London Plan – Initial proposals for the Mayor’s Spatial Development Strategy*, Greater London Authority/ Mayor of London, May 2001)

*‘It is important to maintain London’s attractiveness as a place to live and work and to avoid decentralisation of economic activity, skills and jobs from London, which would threaten its position as a world city, undermine regeneration initiatives and adversely affect the Region as a whole.’<sup>29</sup>*

Regional Planning Guidance for the South East, March 2001

Statements supporting the role of the south and east as the ‘engine of the UK economy’ may be presented in response to suggestions that economic activity or public investment ought to be focused more on other, less prosperous, regions. Objections to ‘undermining the engine of the UK economy’ appear to be based on two very questionable assumptions: first, that any given business somehow contributes more to the UK economy if it is located within the south and east, rather than elsewhere in the UK; and, second, that every proposed business development which is denied planning permission on a greenfield site in the south or east will either never take place or will take place outside the UK (see box opposite).

The dilemma over the choice between ‘stoking the engine of the economy’ and aiming for more even distribution of economic development is borne out by Government statements which each place a very different emphasis on the issue:

*‘A prosperous South East generates orders and creates jobs for companies in the North East. That is a win-win situation.’<sup>30</sup>*

STEPHEN BYERS MP, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, December 2000

When challenged on this point, Minister for Local Government and the Regions, Hilary Armstrong MP appeared to flatly contradict the Secretary of State’s approach:

*‘I don’t think anyone believes in trickle-down any more.’<sup>31</sup>*

## HELD TO RANSOM?

The business lobby is disparaging of suggestions that planning constraints in one area will encourage growth in other areas. The threat – particularly where inward investment (or ‘Foreign Direct Investment’ – FDI) is concerned – is that investment and employment will be lost if the first choice of location is not granted.

But what is the true scale of this threat, and how important is it in the prosperous south and east of England? Even across the UK as a whole, the proportion of investment which is genuinely internationally mobile is small, including that from the ‘big’ investors, such as the US and Japan. The former Director General of the CBI and now member of the Prime Minister’s Forward Strategy Unit, Adair Turner, makes the point that: *‘a large and growing part of any rich economy is not traded across national boundaries or only minimally so.’*<sup>32</sup>

Threats of lost investment even from within the UK are frequently overblown. Other, less environmentally damaging sites may be shown to be acceptable after the developer’s first choice is refused. Unfortunately, planning authorities too often lack the confidence to resist. A generally lax approach to controlling greenfield development in order to prevent investment being lost to the UK is misguided and will perpetuate the cycle of regional division and environmental decline in both town and country.

An example of how the threat of lost investment turning out to be less than convincing is that of electronics

manufacturers, Fidelity, who, in 1995 wanted to establish a 126,000 sq. ft office complex in an historic park in the Green Belt, close to its main centre in west Kent. The risk of the firm relocating its entire operation to mainland Europe was sufficient for the planning authority to lend its support to the scheme. The scheme, however, was scuppered by the listing of a mansion on the site which would have needed to have been demolished to make way for the development. Fidelity, nevertheless remain in the area and the proposed expansion was simply dropped due to changing market requirements.

Of course companies will make threats as part of their bargaining position. Planning authorities (and any other public agencies involved such as RDAs) should judge how seriously to take them, and keep a cool head about just how much of what sort of concession it is actually worth to retain a particular company. Unfortunately, the Government’s emphasis on the significance of globalisation make it easier for companies to make exaggerated threats to go elsewhere.

Many multi-national firms now accept that they have obligations to a wide range of stakeholders rather than merely to their shareholders, and that they have an important role to play in delivering environmental and social objectives. The Government has encouraged this change in corporate thinking and should therefore support planning authorities who take a stand against development proposals which are inconsistent with it.

### THROWING LAND AT SUCCESS?

The drive for economic growth and productivity all too often translates at the local level to pressure on planning authorities to release hugely excessive quantities of land in order to provide for the needs of business. Excessive provision of land results in other land uses (such as housing) being driven out into less favourable locations, and undermines attempts to limit greenfield development.

Where the objective is to enhance regional or local productivity, this land-focussed approach is misguided. The Chief Economic Advisor to the Treasury, Ed Balls makes the point thus:

*'The new way forward is to tackle the causes of slower growth – not with tax incentives for property development.'*<sup>33</sup>

Central to regional productivity is the level of output per capita. A June 2001 report<sup>34</sup> by DTI and the Treasury examined the factors behind differences in the economic performance of the regions, and, in respect of inequalities in output per capita. The report found that: *'The main sources of these inequalities appear to be regional variations in labour productivity levels.'*<sup>35</sup>

The key to improving regional productivity, therefore, is not to attempt to attract new businesses to areas already under economic pressure, but to improve working practices and efficiency so as to improve labour productivity levels.

The argument that the demands of industry and commerce to locate in the most prosperous, fastest growing regions must always be satisfied should be vigorously challenged. There is an important role for the Government to encourage some of this investment to locate or expand in other regions to better reconcile economic, social and environmental objectives.

This is not to say that economic growth in the most prosperous regions should be undermined, or that the environmental quality of the less prosperous regions should be sacrificed. It is simply to recognise that when some parts of England experience heavy traffic congestion, very high land and house prices, and severe environmental strains whilst others suffer from decline, abandonment of housing and large scale land dereliction, there is market failure – and an undeniable case for intervention.

**KEY POINT: The Government needs to develop a clear vision for the economy of the south and east, which discourages land-hungry and traffic-generating development in the economic 'hotspots', and accepts that the pursuit of maximum economic growth in the south and east at the expense of other regions is inconsistent with the goal of more even economic growth across the country and supporting an urban renaissance. ●**

## Discerning development

Not all development is good development, particularly where it threatens the wider objectives of urban renaissance and countryside protection, fails to build strong local economies or capitalise on the regional or local skills base.

In all regions, land – greenfield or brownfield – is a finite resource. National policy has turned away from the profligate use of land for housing,<sup>36</sup> but such a clear focus on using brownfield land is still lacking for economic development (factories, offices, warehouses etc). If the Government's new regional policy is successful, there is a danger that industrial sprawl and congestion will become an increasing problem outside the south and east and do little to bring wider social and economic benefits to those most in need.

Moreover, in many cases, economic and social problems stem not from a lack of development *per se*, but from the wrong kind of development and the inability of local people to gain access to new opportunities. This is due, for example, to lack of training or childcare facilities, or poor public transport or essential services. The central issue is not the *amount* of development, but the kind of development.

The quality of the countryside and the urban environment has been shown to be an important factor in regional economic successes,<sup>37</sup> but this asset is threatened by inappropriate development and the long-term costs of urban decline and dereliction which will in time undermine regional prosperity.

Individual RPGs go some way to promoting wider social, economic and environmental objectives through policies aimed at influencing economic development in rural areas. Moreover, the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) takes forward elements of reform to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), broadening the potential beneficiaries of CAP funding beyond the farm gate to other rural business and rural communities. The ERDP is being developed and taken forward at the regional level and presents significant opportunities for a more rounded and discerning approach to rural development which enhances the environment and better integrates farming with the wider economy of rural areas. RPG and the regional

chapters of the ERDP may, however, be undermined by RDAs or GROs pursuing rural development programmes without adequate reference to policy frameworks and strategies already in place through these initiatives. For example, draft action plans published by several RDAs in late 2001 made no reference whatsoever to the ERDP, despite outlining proposals for economic regeneration in rural areas.

In the pursuit of growth and long term regional competitiveness, economic development policy therefore needs to be more sophisticated than blindly providing more and more land and infrastructure. The South East England RDA (SEEDA), for example, appears to support this approach (see box below), having a policy of avoiding new infrastructure and development which requires expansion onto greenfield sites.

### THE SOUTH EAST: DISCERNING DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION?

The South East RDA has expressed a commitment to a model of economic growth which does not depend on continuing land-take and new infrastructure:

*'SEEDA is aiming to create sustainable economic growth without excess physical expansion'*<sup>38</sup>

This objective is welcome, but it is not yet clear how SEEDA intend to achieve it in the face of continuing development pressure on greenfield sites in the South East. It is unlikely to be realised without the support of a national policy setting out what kind of development should and should not be taking place in the South East Region.

To prevent industrial sprawl and congestion becoming an increasing problem outside the south and east, and to ensure that economic development enhances stability and brings real benefits to the locality, the new regional policy should encourage Government departments, GROs and the RDAs to move away from pursuing footloose and land-hungry investment and to adopt a *discerning* approach to development. Discerning development meets wider social, economic and environmental objectives by:

- strengthening existing local economies by capitalising on the regional or local skills base and adding value to existing activity;
- prioritising the right skills and training ahead of the wasteful use of land, enabling successful participation in the modern, knowledge-based economy; and
- keeping a tight reign on greenfield land releases.

### BAD OLD WAYS

CPRE invited the RDAs (and also Regional Planning Bodies) to use their second anniversary as an occasion to adopt targets for increasing the proportion of economic development taking place on previously developed sites combining to a national target of 85%. The RDAs collectively refused to adopt any such targets in principle,<sup>39</sup> indicating a lack of commitment to moving away from old-style, land-hungry development strategies. The 'reasons' given were unconvincing:

- the similar target for housing would produce complications;
- the targets would have to be agreed through the land use planning system;
- the RDAs have limited influence on the pattern of economic development;
- RPG is at different stages in its review around England;
- some greenfield development is inevitable; and
- limiting greenfield releases will impede economic recovery from the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease.

Fundamentally – and most disappointingly – the RDAs offered no acceptance of the need or scope to improve on past performance.

### THE KNOWLEDGE DIVIDE

Gross Domestic Product (workplace basis) per Head<sup>40</sup>

vs. Regional knowledge based industries

(*'Knowledge based industries' as a proportion of all business in each region. A comparative assessment based on an index whereby United Kingdom scores 100.*)



Source: Huggins, R. University of Cardiff. April 2000<sup>41</sup>

If regional productivity is closely linked with the level of modern, knowledge-based industry – as the data suggests – then providing the right skills and training for indigenous growth will be more important than simply providing land and infrastructure.

### MOVING AWAY FROM INWARD INVESTMENT

Irrespective of the validity of claims by internationally mobile investors that the refusal of planning permission will lead to lost investment (see *The engine of the economy?*), careful consideration should be given to the benefits that inward investment are likely to bring. A regional economic strategy which relies on FDI is environmentally flawed because it encourages local planning authorities to over-allocate greenfield land in the misguided hope that this is a key factor in attracting investors. Much of this land may be better used for other purposes, such as housing, or may end up being developed 'piecemeal' by small scale investors and undermining urban regeneration strategies. In reality, the availability of greenfield sites may well be a secondary consideration in locational decisions. Other factors may be more significant, such as the availability of skills within the workforce, access to markets, the image of the area and quality of the surroundings.

But an approach which depends on FDI is also flawed economically. Research identified in a 2001 report by the Institute of Public Policy Research<sup>42</sup> has shown that:

- employment benefits are often exaggerated (fewer jobs actually materialise than are expected);
- the costs per job (to the public purse) is higher than reported due to wider costs such as site regeneration;
- there is a lack of benefit brought to local economies through engagement with local suppliers, technology transfer, new skills and a lack of 'demonstrator effects';
- 'bidding wars' between regions mean that taxpayer pays more than necessary;
- economic instability arises out of a dependence on volatile of international markets;
- regional competition can mean simply the transfer of jobs around the UK and therefore Government subsidy for rationalisation;
- the costs per job is 80% higher for FDI than indigenous businesses.

In addition, the benefits which have been had from FDI are frequently short-lived. A recent high profile case in point is the fiasco over BMW 'saving' the Rover car plant at Longbridge in the West Midlands in 1994, followed within only six years by a complete withdrawal and sale. Despite the shortcomings of inward investment, 60% of Regional Selective Assistance – the main plank of Government funded support for economic development – went to FDI in 1996/7. Much of this very considerable sum might have been better spent promoting indigenous enterprise in a way which brings tangible benefits to the locality: developing the right skills base and training; promoting stability by adding value to local economies; developing local supply chains and avoiding the wasteful use of land.

The CBI – the 'voice of business' – is also sceptical about the wisdom of focusing heavily on inward investment:

*'In promoting enterprise and innovation, the RDAs need to... avoid an over-emphasis on encouraging foreign investment in comparison to the effort put into creating the climate for locally-based businesses to grow.'*<sup>43</sup>

**KEY POINT: To prevent development pressure simply being transferred from greenfield sites in the south to greenfield sites in the north, the concept of 'discerning development' needs to be central to the new regional policy. Discerning development is where growth is sought through promoting indigenous skills, adding value to the local economy, making efficient use of land, and through the provision of targeted training. This approach needs to be endorsed by central Government and taken forward by the Regional Development Agencies, Government Regional Offices and Regional Planning Bodies. ●**

## Giving a steer – an Action Plan for the regions

Economic development should be encouraged where it can best promote urban renaissance and countryside protection. England's supply of previously developed urban land and buildings, however, is concentrated in the northern regions and the West Midlands. A combination of weak demand, barriers to investment and weak planning controls is preventing these land resources from being exploited. The result is continuing pressure on greenfield sites in all regions, and particularly in the south and east. Ultimately, the

attractiveness of previously developed land in the less prosperous regions needs to grow and businesses need to know that greenfield sites will not be an option anywhere until the full opportunities of an urban renaissance have been exploited. Far more targeted Government action is required within a Regional Action Plan to lower the barriers to investment in the north and the midlands and to focus economic development on previously developed land and buildings. Opposite we propose a number of priorities for that Action Plan. ●

## A Government Action Plan

In order to 'level the economic playing field' and encourage a shift in the balance of economic growth in England, the Government should:

- target Government investment in R&D projects so as to support growth in areas most in need of regeneration;
- increase the funding available for targeted support for industry, such as Regional Selective Assistance;
- introduce selective adjustments to business rates, corporation tax and increases in capital allowances outside the economic 'hotspots';<sup>44</sup>
- redistribute more public sector jobs to the regions with the most capacity to accommodate them;
- promote cities in the north and midlands through positive marketing and building a positive image for investors; and
- improve public transport links between city centres and regional 'travel to work' areas;

In order to integrate these initiatives and the new regional policy with urban renaissance and countryside protection objectives in all regions, the Government should:

- make a clear commitment that initiatives taken under the new regional policy should promote the objectives of the Urban and Rural White Papers and contribute to improved quality of life;
- establish a coherent national spatial development framework providing a clear national overview of likely or desired patterns of development and co-ordinating Regional Planning Guidance;
- link public investment and economic development programmes with urban renaissance objectives and apply

environmental and land use criteria to the funding streams;

- establish more ambitious regeneration targets at a national and regional level and a target of 85% of economic development to take place on previously developed sites;<sup>45</sup>
- expand funding for regenerating derelict urban sites to create high quality investment sites in urban areas;
- establish a national agency to co-ordinate the out-migration of businesses from the overheated south and east, and promote their relocation on previously developed sites in other regions; and
- require RDA strategies and the regeneration programmes of Government Regional Offices to support Regional Planning Guidance and the regional chapters of the England Rural Development Programme.

These initiatives do not seek a return to 1960s-style 'top-down' regional economic planning or require the Government to 'pick winners' for future investment. Rather, they help to liberate the opportunities for 'bottom-up' development in unfavoured regions which also promotes the urban renaissance.

**KEY POINT: The Government's new regional policy should be backed by an Action Plan setting out action at a national level which will lower the barriers to investment in the less prosperous regions and make it easier for businesses to operate from previously developed sites. ●**

## A better regional policy

This report has made the case for the Government's new regional policy to recognise and address the social and environmental dimension to the economic divide. It sets out an action plan that will reduce economic disparities between and within the regions and arrest the cycle of decline caused by urban decay, urban out-migration, traffic congestion and urban sprawl. These objectives need to be backed by clear statements of Government policy.

CPRE is calling on the Government to develop its new regional policy so that it:

- recognises the regional economic divide has an environmental and land use dimension;
- incorporates environmental protection, land use and urban renaissance objectives which guide the use of public investment and other support; and
- supports action at a national, regional and local level to make previously developed land in regions outside the south and east more attractive to investors. ●

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CPRE exists to promote the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England by encouraging the sustainable use of land and other natural resources in town and country. We promote positive solutions for the long term future of the countryside and to ensure change values its natural and built environment. Our Patron is Her Majesty The Queen. We have 57,000 supporters, a branch in every county, nine regional groups, over 200 local groups and a national office in Westminster. Membership is open to all. Formed in 1926, CPRE is a powerful combination of effective local action and strong national campaigning. Our President is Prunella Scales.

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