



‘Championing Social Inclusion across the South East Region’

Social Inclusion Partnership South East (SIPSE) Response to the Consultation on the South East Plan

Background Information:

The Social Inclusion Partnership South East (SIPSE) is a high level partnership within the region. It has a role to promote social inclusion and through partnership working offer ‘SIPSE Products’ that can support organisations within the region to tackle or prevent social exclusion.

SIPSE developed a South East Social Inclusion Statement in 2002, which was endorsed by Government Office for the South East; SEEDA; Regional Assembly; Housing Corporation; NHS Development Agency; RAISE; and Social Services Inspectorate. The South East was the first region to create and endorse a statement of this magnitude, which was included in the Integrated Regional Framework as the underpinning policy for all other regional policies.

Currently SIPSE is piloting a ‘social inclusion checklist’ that asks a series of questions which, when applied to any policy consultation document, enables a series of questions to be asked. These queries and questions help SIPSE to better understand if any one policy document is accessible, has a social inclusion focus and if it seeks to prevent or tackle social exclusion.

SIPSE at their meeting on 24th February 2005 agreed to apply the checklist to the South East Plan and having done so would like to make the following observations and comments.

For ease of reading this response we have included each social inclusion checklist question from 1-12 followed by the relevant comments and observations.

1. Are your documents/plans written in plain English?

1.1 Can a document that runs to over 260 pages be regarded as “user friendly”? It takes approx 45 minutes to download and needs to be printed off in colour as the graphs and charts do not make any sense in black and white.

1.2 The full document reads as a planner’s document and contains significant amounts of technical language. The Executive Summary is easier to understand from a non-planning perspective but does not offer the interpretation of the technical language that is needed to understand the full document.

2. Are your documents available in large print, Braille, tape formats and other languages, if required?

2.1 The full document is only available in hard copy or on-line from the Regional Assembly website. If you are unable to download the document or do not have access to the web then you are required to purchase a copy of the plan at a cost of £30.

2.2 The Executive Summary and consultation leaflet and questionnaire are available in larger print which is provided on request. These larger print versions are able to be used on 'screen reader' devices. There is an audio link on the website that gives access to a taped version of the Executive Summary and consultation leaflet and questionnaire.

2.3 The Regional Assembly have made provision to produce the material for consultation in alternative languages but 'by request' only. The observation is that if the publication materials are not circulated in other languages then it is unlikely that anyone requiring translation would know about the consultation or in fact request any documents.

3. How is your policy 'owned'? Who has contributed to the process and how?

3.1 Ownership is predominately with the Regional Assembly and thus Local Authorities through their membership role within the Regional Assembly. The observation is that this does seem to be at odds with local consultation that is being carried out by Local Authorities where messages appear inconsistent with those contained in the Plan. This raises the question of how can local people own a plan that is politically driven at a local level.

3.2 Looking at the plan there are references to the Integrated Regional Framework (IRF) and the Spring Debates. However, the plan has chosen to put social, cultural, education and health dimensions together in a 9 page chapter. This chapter consists of 50:50 split between text and pictures/graphs and we question whether 9 pages within a document of 268 pages sends the right messages about the priorities placed on these areas within the plan. Considering the Social Inclusion Statement was the priority policy for the IRF, which was jointly launched with the Chair of SIPSE, it is disappointing that the Social Inclusion Statement itself does not have a higher focus throughout the Plan.

4. How do you ensure your policy is put into practice? Is it referred to or reviewed?

4.1 SIPSE held a recent 'Implications of ageing in the Region' conference at which the South East Plan was a focus for part of the day. There were concerns raised following the presentation by the Regional Assembly's Chair of the data group about how robust the evidence base and data are that underpin the plan. For example, are the datasets quoted the most current ones available and are they reliable and in line with previous trends? We raise this as there is a further 'disclaimer' on the Executive Summary, back page, that says 'serious doubt remains over the robustness of the data that underpins much of the technical work on which this draft South East Plan is based'. As this is such an important document for the Region we ask for clarification as to what impact this has on the whole document.

4.2 We are not convinced that there is evidence of commitment to an Inclusive Region as indicated in the Social Inclusion Statement and the IRF. Whilst acknowledging the need for the plan to reflect the technical aspects of a planning document, the policies contained within section D9 are aspirational

and have little or no tangible targets. The remainder of the document has sparse references to social inclusion.

4.3 There is rightly a strong spatial angle to the document but we feel that there is a general lack of implications for people within the document.

5. Will this document/policy have any effect on children living in poverty?

5.1 It is not clear as to what effect this plan will have on child poverty nor does it provide links to 'Every Child Matters'.

6. Will this improve skills/qualifications for anyone?

6.1 The importance of improved skills and qualifications is recognised within the plan but the focus is very much on formal education. There is scope to look at informal/community education and learning related to regeneration.

6.2 Education and skills are contained within section D9 but this is not reflected in the title or core document list on page 3 of the plan.

7. Have you consulted a range of people with different needs?

7.1 The leaflet into every household goes some way to addressing needs but is insufficient in isolation. The leaflet and related questionnaire does not reference the main document so that interested parties could look at relevant sections of the plan to assist them with their responses or the questionnaire. Looking at the questionnaire we feel that many of the questions are 'closed'. The response requires people to address their own envelope and use their own stamp. While this is not a significant hurdle for many people it could contribute to a lesser response, particularly from people who would not normally respond or feel included in a consultation exercise of this nature.

7.2 The Social and Environmental Partners within the Assembly, supported by the Assembly Partners Support Unit managed by RAISE, has undertaken some work to reach black and minority ethnic communities and groups and the more disadvantaged communities and groups. There were approximately 50 individuals who attended the consultation events via this route. However, it is unclear as to how Local Authorities have endeavoured to pursue this area of work.

8. Is your service delivered in a place/method that all people can access?

8.1 Hard copies of the full plan have to be bought at a cost of £30. This is extremely excluding.

8.2 Our understanding is that several copies of the plan were sent to each of the Local Authorities as 'public inspection' copies to be displayed within every council office. We cannot see from the publicity that this has been promoted or offered.

8.3 We further understand that all Parish Councils have been sent a copy but can find no evidence of how these copies have been used to inform local people.

8.4 We have been informed that copies of the plan were sent to every Local Authority for distribution to libraries and other public information points. Is there a breakdown from each Local Authority as to where these are and if so, where is this captured and promoted?

8.5 We seek clarification or evidence of written guidance to Local Authorities as to distribution of consultation documents, particularly within public information points as lack of this will have led to patchy distribution, which is excluding.

9. Is the signage to and point of delivery clear for all?

9.1 We are pleased that there is a timetable for the process available on the Assembly website so people can track where things are happening. However, we are concerned that there appears to be much confusion over the next stage of consultation and ask for clarification. Without this many people are likely to continue to be excluded as we move into the next phase.

10. Will your policy/service be affordable for users?

10.1 We reiterate that the document is expensive to obtain and it is not clear where public information point are located. As the document is so long, accessing a view-only document that has to remain on site is of little use to most members of the public. We question if it is right that a plan for people and about people should have to be bought by the people?

11. How does your service make people feel welcome?

Issues raised at 1, 2 and 10 cover this question.

12. To what extent does this increase employment opportunities/money for people who experience disadvantage?

12.1 There is a focus on the economic agenda and thus employment opportunities within the plan. However, the plan does not address the problems experienced by people who face disadvantage. How will it link with the ODPM's Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy or the Sure Start initiative? Neither does it make reference to or connect with the Home Office's 'Firm Foundations' policy. This does raise the question of how will regeneration or infrastructure development activity proceed in the future if there is not a robust focus in the plan from which to build?

Summary:

This response sets out to highlight some of the gaps, questions and queries that relate to the South East Plan in the context of social inclusion. We contribute our response to be viewed positively and constructively, as we are keen that where we raise questions and queries they will be considered by the Regional Assembly and taken into account when moving forward.

SIPSE
14th April 2005

Note: This document was submitted to the Assembly via e-mail on 15th April 2005, with a hard copy sent to the Assembly, addressed to Philip Craig.