

Environment, Planning and Countryside Committee

EPC(2) 04-06(p9)

Date: Wednesday 8 March 2006

Venue: Committee Room 2, Assembly Office

EPC Committee Report on the EU Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment

Purpose

1. To advise the Committee about the EC Communication on the European Union (EU) Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment which issued on 11 January 2006.

Summary

2. This paper outlines the provisions of the Communication, and its implications for Wales, as requested by the Committee. The Communication and an Annex setting out an Impact Assessment are available via the following link :

<http://assembly/planning/Thematic%20Strategy%20on%20the%20Urban%20Environment%20EM.htm>

Background

3. In January 2004, the Commission set out its ideas for a Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment. It initially identified four, priority cross-cutting themes for sustainable urban transport, urban environmental management, construction and urban design

4. These were considered essential to contribute to an improved urban environment, making cities more attractive, healthier places to live, work and invest in, and reducing the adverse environmental impact of cities on the wider environment, for example with regard to climate change.

5. In its early stages the Strategy proposed that

- capital cities and urban areas with over 100,000 population should be required to adopt an urban environmental management plan, and implement appropriate environmental management and monitoring systems with targets related to key environmental impacts.

- Member States should be encouraged to adopt a national sustainable construction programme to include building renovation, and to deal with issues related to demolition and construction waste.

6. It proposed that Member States should be encouraged to ensure their land use planning systems achieve sustainable development, taking account of environmental risks, encourage use of brownfield sites, limit urban sprawl and evaluate the consequences of climatic change.

7. When consulted, the Assembly Government expressed concern that any requirement to prepare additional plans would lead to duplication, confusion about the roles of different plans, and would cut across existing plans. It was considered that the aims of the Strategy would be better served by plans currently being prepared.

8. Concern was also expressed that

- it would be difficult to define areas which may be affected by the strategy, given the settlement pattern in South and North East Wales,
- many issues identified were not solely urban, and
- the Strategy would be better focussed on best practice, standards and mechanisms rather than seeking to put in place a requirement for additional plans and structures.

9. While welcoming the interest in sustainable development, the UK Government also argued that the Strategy should not create additional plans and bureaucracy, and that its provisions should not be a legal requirement on any Member State.

10. In Autumn 2004, a Working Group, with representatives of Member States was set up to advise the Commission on the practical operation of environmental management plans and systems.

11. The Working Group report, published in February 2005, provided advice on how the Strategy should best be taken forward in the light of comments received.

Consideration

12. The Communication of 11 January 2006, focuses solely on environmental management and sustainable urban transport. It supports the promotion of best practice, effective networking, research and training, and the provision of guidance, but recognises that legislation is not the best way to achieve Strategy objectives.

13. The Communication offers the opportunity for the better implementation of EU environmental policies and legislation at local level by supporting local authorities to adopt a more integrated approach to urban environmental management, aided by Member States.

14. The Commission has indicated that it intends to

- provide technical guidance on integrated urban environmental management, and on the main aspects of transport plans.
- support the exchange of good practice and demonstration projects, and evaluate a pilot project set up to achieve this.
- assess the feasibility of setting up a thematic portal for local authorities,
- support capacity building for local authorities on urban environmental management issues.
- offer support for further research on urban issues.

15. The measures set out in the Communication are voluntary in nature and do not raise issues of subsidiarity or proportionality. The proposals leave decisions on the type and scope of actions to the local level, since it is not possible to set standard solutions for the diverse situations in Europe.

16. It also encourages Member States to exploit opportunities to address problems facing their urban areas. In May 2006, following a Ministerial Meeting, the Presidency intends to present the Communication to the Environment Council for adoption.

17 The Assembly Government has a duty to promote sustainable development. The Assembly's strategic agenda is set down in the Sustainable Development Scheme, Wales: a Better Country and the Wales Spatial Plan. Other key strategies- The Environment Strategy for Wales, Wales: A vibrant Economy and Communities First - sit within this framework to underpin delivery of sustainable development. These and other strategies and policies provide the framework within which environmental, land use planning, transport, social and economic issues can be addressed

18 Planning, particularly the preparation of development plans by local planning authorities, continues to be a key component in the delivery of sustainable development. The new Local Development Plan (LDP) system, which came into operation in Wales in October 2005 requires each local planning authority to prepare a plan for its area, and to have regard to the achievement of sustainable development in doing so.

19. Each LDP must be subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment of its effects on the environment in compliance with EU Directive 2001/42/EC, and to a Sustainability Appraisal of the plan's economic, environmental and social effects.

20. The Assembly Government already works with partners in local government and other sectors to promote and share best practice in planning and other areas of activity concerned with the environmental, economic and social quality of life in urban areas.

Financial Implications

21. There are no financial implications for the Assembly Government or for local authorities, since the measures set out are voluntary in nature.

Cross Cutting Themes

22. The Assembly Government continues to work with partners in other sectors to develop and deliver strategies and policies. Many land use and environmental policies are delivered through an effective planning service, which meets the Assembly's aims and objectives, particularly regarding sustainable development.

23. The Assembly Government's public services reform statement in "Making the Connection" contained a commitment to radical rationalisation of plans required to be produced by local authorities. The new LDP system provides opportunities for effective community involvement in the preparation of plans, which address planning issues in urban and rural areas.

Action for Committee

24. The Committee is invited to note the issue of the Communication and its role in relation to Assembly Government themes.

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