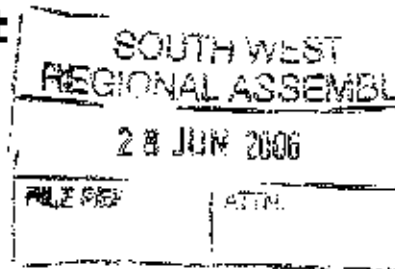


Department for  
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23 June 2006

*Dear Ms Houlden*

Thank you for the letter of 12 May from Jackie Longworth and other leading Members of the Regional Assembly, concerning the recently submitted draft RSS. I am sure that you will ensure that this reply is copied to all the signatories.

First I would like say that I am equally pleased to see that the Assembly has now submitted the draft RSS. I congratulate you on ensuring that the document was approved by the timetable agreed with Government and I understand that you expect to publish the draft for public consultation on 6 June.

As you already know, from Hilary Neal's reply of 9 May to your submission letter to GOSW, it is expected that an Examination in Public on the draft RSS will take place starting in April 2007 and arrangements have been made to facilitate this. That letter also made it clear that now the draft RSS has been submitted officials are not able to enter into discussions with you about its contents. I am sure that you will understand that I and other Ministers also cannot comment on the contents of the submitted document at this time. The Government will make written representations on the draft RSS once this has been published for public consultation. I note that you have sent amended copies of your letter to my colleagues at the Treasury, DTI, DfT and DEFRA, and my reply is also copied to them.

I would make one point however. Your letter states that the draft RSS was approved by your Assembly on 10 March 2006. As you know revised household forecasts were published by the Government on 14 March. It will clearly be necessary for your Assembly to undertake further work before the start of the EIP on the Implications of those revised forecasts and present proposals to the Panel on how the region would plan for the consequences of these and possibly higher forecasts if the evidence supported the need to do so. I have therefore asked my officials in GOSW to discuss with you, as soon as possible, on how you propose to ensure that your work programme for the EIP fully addresses this.

The Government remains interested in the Region's proposals for a Regional Infrastructure Fund and a Capacity Building Fund. You will understand we need to hear more about how these will work in practice but I do think it illustrates an important point about a successful regional approach.

You raise more detailed concerns in your letter about future infrastructure provision, around affordable housing, the impact of air travel and sustainable construction etc. I assure you that I have noted these concerns and, in particular, how you consider they are particularly relevant to the South West. However I am sure that you will also agree that in the main these issues and possible actions on them eg constraining airport growth in the south west or any revision of mandatory building standards are of national significance and any revisions to Government policy to these must be considered initially in that context.

The RFA advice that you refer to in your letter has of course already been submitted to Government. This is currently being considered by Government and its response will be made shortly. I also recognise the very real issue of affordability in rural areas that you raise as your second issue, although of course this is an issue that concerns the region's urban areas also. As your letter notes, we have allocated considerable resources for the Housing Corporation's Affordable Housing Programme in the south west for 2006-08 and this is expected to provide significant numbers of additional homes in rural settlements. We are also looking closely at the recent report published by the Affordable Rural Housing Commission, and welcome its practical suggestions. We of course share your wish to establish balanced and properly functioning housing markets across the region that local people can access

For the various reasons I do not think therefore that a meeting as you suggest in your penultimate paragraph, to discuss these in regional context would be necessary at this time. I have asked GOSW officials to continue to keep in close contact with you on these issues and to keep me informed as necessary.

May I reiterate in conclusion my pleasure in learning of the submission of the draft RSS and that it will now set underway the formal consideration of the document. However as I also set out above it will be vital that the evidence presented to the EiP is robust, adequate and realistically addresses the needs and demands likely to be faced by the south west over the next 20 years.

*Yours sincerely,*

*Ruth Kelly*

**RUTH KELLY**