

RTPI NEWS

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Careful study of European research can inform planning policy in the UK

The ESPON UK network is examining how planning professionals across the country can best take advantage of research conducted by the network in Europe when developing strategic plans, reports *Jenny Crawford*

Despite post-election changes in national policy and the dismantling of key regional planning tools in England, planners across the UK continue to implement the principles of integration and sustainability in developing and delivering strategic development policy.

In Wales, ministers have acknowledged the role of the Wales spatial plan in helping to shape tighter public finances over the past 18 months. Joint ministerial partnerships for each of the six Wales Spatial Plan areas co-ordinate strategic policies and projects.

In Scotland, councils are developing partnerships to deliver the second national planning framework. In Northern Ireland, the minister for regional development has recently emphasised the role of the region's spatial strategy in securing development.

The London Plan represents the most thorough example of regional planning developed in England and so far it has escaped an onslaught on its foundations, despite the reduced potential for integration that the abolition of the Government Office for London may represent.

Communities secretary Eric Pickles noted at this year's RTPI Planning Convention that London needs a spatial strategy because it is a major city. Hopefully this reflects an appreciation of the strategic dynamics of urban planning that will be extended to the needs of other areas, including rural regions that rely on their economic and service links to urban centres of varying scales.

The appreciation of how places work and the exploration of how they could work better underpins the European ESPON research programme, funded by the European Regional Development Fund and national governments. How can we



Capital strategy: the London Plan shows benefit of regional strategies

make places more competitive in international and national markets, more attractive to live and work in, more environmentally secure and less destructive?

These are questions not just for government but for the whole development community. Answering them requires us to understand the development context at all levels. ESPON data analysis enables consideration of global and sub-national trends. It is also exploring comparisons between neighbouring local authority areas, as evidenced by a recent University of Manchester study on the effects of urban concentration on economic indicators.

A synthesis of results is due to be published later this year by the ESPON co-ordination unit in Luxembourg. Drawing on ESPON's recent research reports, it will outline the demographic, resource and environmental challenges facing Europe and explore the implications

for spatial policies aimed at settlement structure, connectivity and urban-rural relationships.

Some of these reports are already available online in draft form and point to the significance of co-operation between places in fostering innovation, knowledge industries and quality of life that underpins the Europe 2020 economic strategy.

The climate change policy agenda has also strengthened the incorporation of ecosystem analysis into the spatial research agenda. Current ESPON work emphasises that climate change impacts will depend more on the character and function of places than on the severity of climate change itself. This opens up new avenues to assess how the resilience of our cities, towns and neighbourhoods can be enhanced.

The ESPON UK network was set up in 2008 by the RTPI to support enhanced UK interaction with the research being rolled out under the ESPON programme. Over the next few months, the network will be considering the implications of the first round of reports for the UK and bringing together a UK-focused synthesis in the context of the wider Europe-wide document.

A new project funded by the programme will enable the network to explore how UK development professionals can most usefully incorporate ESPON analysis into their work. It will be looking for examples of cutting-edge strategic planning where practitioners can use European perspectives to inform their evidence base and policy assessment.

Jenny Crawford is the RTPI's head of research. To find out more and take part in the work of the ESPON UK network, please visit www.espon.org.uk or email research@rtpi.org.uk

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