

## **CLIMATE CHANGE + COMMUNITIES: A Call to Action**

Annual Conference of the Canadian Institute of Planners – Institut Canadien des Urbanistes, Montreal, Québec, Canada

2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> October 2010

### **Final Day Theme: Communities in the Face of Climate Change**

#### **Session with Global Planners Network Partners:**

Bruce Knight, President, American Planning Association, USA

Christine Platt, President, Commonwealth Association of Planners, South Africa

Neil Savery, President, Planning Institute of Australia, Australia

**Ann Skippers, President, Royal Town Planning Institute, United Kingdom**

#### **MODERATOR:**

Marni Cappe MCIP, President, Canadian Institute of Planners, Toronto ON

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#### **Speech by Ann Skippers, RTPI President:**

Good afternoon. It is a great pleasure to be invited to Montreal and to have this opportunity to share with you what's happening in the UK and **the work of the Royal Town Planning Institute.**

UK planners are currently **facing major reform** of the planning system in England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own planning systems and so to give you a flavour of the key issues I'm going to concentrate on the current situation facing planners in England and Wales.

The fact we are facing major reform is important. We have already been through major reform over the last few years. So we are facing major reform again and a barrage of almost daily announcements on planning matters by the Coalition Government. Elected last May, two of our main political parties, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, joined together to form the new Coalition Government. On planning the two parties hold similar views which is perhaps why things are happening so quickly in our sector.

So how are we reacting to this situation? A situation of great **uncertainty** for planning professionals against a backdrop of an economic recession, massive public sector funding cuts and a development industry that is up in arms. Up in arms because our regional level of plans which, amongst other things, set housing targets has suddenly been abolished and overnight local councils have abandoned schemes which were already in the pipeline.

And to make matters worse in some parts of the country the recession has caused construction workers to literally abandon their tools as partly finished development is left to take its own chances.

And so I share the concern of planners in the UK and of the RTPI's 23,000 or so members. We are all wondering what will happen and we are worried about what might happen.

Not only are we concerned about our job prospects, but we are also concerned intellectually about the direction the new Government is choosing for planning.

And so it is all very gloomy. **Or is it?** With a new Government and major reform comes an opportunity to rethink the planning process, to change its emphasis perhaps and to make it better.

The Coalition Government has taken a very firm stance. It has clearly signalled the end of top down centralisation, the end of nationally driven policies and guidance, the end of the target driven culture and is keen to put power back into the hands of the local community.

**The buzz word is localism.** No one is quite sure what this means, but essentially it is about local communities, neighbourhoods, leading on planning and taking responsibility for what happens in their areas. As planners we know that this will have its challenges as well as create great opportunities.

The RTPI has taken a **constructive approach** to these new ideas. We are one of the few organisations to have meet Ministers. The Minister did not want to sit around a table and have a conventional meeting: he wanted to be shown examples of good planning. And that's exactly what we did. And this is one of the most important functions of a professional institute – establishing a dialogue with the Ministers, with politicians and showcasing the profession's work.

The proposed reforms to the planning system give us a very real opportunity to ensure that climate change and communities are at the very heart of any new system.

But it also shows how politicised planning is in the UK and of course this has implications for addressing climate change if it is not high on the Government's own agenda.

But we can campaign and we can lobby and we do this in a variety of ways.

Earlier this year, before the election, the RTPI published its own **Manifesto**. This sets out what we stand for and is the most comprehensive statement ever to come out of the RTPI.

We firmly believe that in order for planning to be effective we need to move beyond sustainable development. We need a **different definition of sustainable** development so that mitigation and adaptation measures can be

balanced with social, economic and environmental objectives and the prudent use of natural resources.

Last year the RTPI published **seven commitments to climate change**. These are not airy fairy, pie in the sky aspirations, but real actions with real consequences.

The first commitment is promoting behavioural change which is self explanatory.

The second is adapting existing places which is interesting as the momentum has shifted in the UK from mitigation to a growing realisation that adaptation must go hand in hand with mitigation.

Our third commitment is working towards responsive legislation and policies – in other words working with the Government on new policies and advice. This may yet prove to be a challenge as the Government has clearly signalled that it will not issue very much national policy or guidance; the regional tier has already gone and so it will be up to local communities to get on with it.

The next three commitments form a set around improving current practice, celebrating best practice and compiling a compendium of best practice whilst the last commitment relates to skills and education.

I'd like to say a few more words on that group of three commitments around the **practice of planning**.

To help improve current practice, the RTPI has committed to **developing a toolkit** of tests to climate change proof plans and policies.

The RTPI has already started to compile a **compendium of practice**. This is a web based facility and has been going about a year now. At the moment relies on a single staff member to sweep websites, trade journals and other sources of information for examples of practice from all over the UK. These are then put on the website with a short description with signposts and links to further information.

In the future I would like to see this compendium of practice morph into a compendium of best practice which is peer reviewed and I'd also like it to be full of case studies of not only what was done, but how it was done as well.

But already the compendium is popular with over 15,000 hits on the RTPI website, one of the largest number of hits of any single page on the website which says to me that there is a real need for information of this kind to be in one place, how important it is to share information and to make sure information is readily available. There really isn't time to reinvent the wheel on every project we do.

Our annual **awards** shine a much needed spotlight on the often overlooked achievements of our profession and help to celebrate our achievements. It is also an equally important opportunity to showcase these achievements to a wider audience.

I'd like to say a few words about this year's sustainable communities award winner as it is such a good example of new development which tackles climate change head on and involves the community it has created through behavioural changes brought about through a combination of vision, the buildings themselves and on going support and management.

**One Brighton** is a high density, mixed use redevelopment in the centre of Brighton on the south coast about an hour's train ride from London.

The site had been derelict for fifty years. A number of initiatives had started on the site, but all had been unsuccessful.

The Council decided to do something about this and produced a masterplan. One Brighton is the result. It provides over 170 units of which three are affordable social housing units as well as office and community space for local organisations.

It is the first project to be built under the developer's 'one planet living' principle which aims to enable and encourage people to live within a sustainable ecological footprint, taking responsibility for their consumption of resources.

It has a central location, it is a zero carbon development and produces its own heating and hot water from an onsite biomass boiler. It has mini wind turbines on its roof.

On the rooftops, there are mini allotments for growing fruit and vegetables. Each apartment has its own recycling facilities. Parking is limited to disabled users and a residents' car club. There is also a 'green concierge' who helps residents embrace their new lifestyle. In other words this scheme offers a different way of life.

It came about as a result of clear collaboration between a forward thinking developer and a forward thinking public authority working together on an initial vision. As well as winning a prestigious RTPI award, this project will raise the bar locally enabling the local authority to insist on higher standards in other new developments in its area as well as being a national exemplar.

As with all these schemes they do not happen overnight. The masterplan was approved back in 2003. This project took a lot of hard work and effort over a

number of years. Another good reason if we ever needed one to get on with the job before time runs out on us.

You know **the focus is often on new development** and in many ways this is because it is the easiest thing to do. It is arguably easier to set new standards for new development.

A good example of this is the **code for sustainable homes**. This is a national standard which has been in operation for about three years. It is a way of rating new homes in two stages. The first stage is the design stage whilst the second is post construction. The Code rates the whole house as a package looking at energy, water, pollution, waste, ecology, and health and well being. It rates homes from 1 to 6, 6 being the highest standard and zero carbon. All new homes must be code 6 or zero carbon by 2016.

This has been quite successful with the private sector embracing the Code although just this week some developers have begun to put pressure on the Government to reduce the standard saying it is no longer economically viable.

So for new development we have at least up to this point in time, been able to set a high benchmark. But there is a need to raise awareness about climate change and to take collective responsibility as a profession.

Another issue that comes up time and time again is that of **skills and capacity building**. A number of Government reports have highlighted that there is a growing awareness of climate change issues and that planning is fundamental to addressing climate change, but that too often a short term approach is still being taken by decision makers and that a lack of skills and capacity are barriers to addressing climate change.

So to help with this, we will be launching an **online directory of distance learning modules** for our members later this year. This has been sponsored by the Government and will be free to members. The first module will be on climate change.

So let me recap for a moment. We have a newly elected Coalition Government and money is tight. We are holding our breath to see what happens in the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review later this month which will set budgets for the next few years.

You can see from all I've said how political planning is. We can't get away from this fact. At a recent meeting I attended the delegates were asked what the biggest threat to achieving a successful low carbon economy might be. The winner was lack of political will.

**And although climate change is rising up the political agenda, it's still not high enough on that agenda.**

But there is definitely political will for something I mentioned earlier - **localism** – putting power back into the hands of local people.

As planners we know that community is hard to define. It is not a homogenous area. **Communities do not speak with one voice, but many voices.** It stuck me that this resonates so well with what Wade Davies said yesterday during his fascinating opening address.

**There is a real opportunity to put climate change high up on the agenda, at the top of the agenda where it needs to be, if we can find a way of many voices putting climate change on their agenda then there is a way of ensuring that the pressing issues can be dealt with.**

Maybe in the face of adversity, communities will be able to come together and take pride in their neighbourhoods. **Maybe localism is an opportunity to find local solutions far stronger and bolder than they have been for some time.**

But there is an issue. And that is how we deal with those things which can't easily be dealt with at the local level. There is a fear, no perhaps that's the wrong word, a suspicion perhaps that the Government's localism agenda may lead to **NIMBYISM** taking over the world. The Not in My Back Yard crew tends to be articulate and our challenge as planners is how we ensure that communities with their great richness of diversity can be heard.

There is also another issue with localism. The Government has announced a **community right to build.** In rural areas this means that community based organisations could develop land for housing provided that 75% of the community vote in favour of the scheme. So a referendum would be held and if 75% of the voters wanted it to go ahead that would be ok. It would not need to go through the planning system. It applies to green belt land too.

Now this in itself might be ok, but how do we ensure that climate change is made a priority? How do we join up what happens at the local level with the more strategic issues?

Over the summer the RTPI lead a campaign to say to the Government that strategic planning, **planning at a larger than local level** is needed. Thirty other organisations joined us in this campaign. Thirty other organisations that wouldn't usually work with us or work together. A whole industry joined forces. And it worked. We had a high level of coverage in the media, a live national radio interview and a reply from the Secretary of State agreeing to meet us.

And so planners have an important role to play in helping communities to reach consensus, to consider options and to be innovative.

The Government has said that it will introduce a **presumption in favour of sustainable development**, however that might be defined. There is another role for professional institutes to come up with that definition, agree it within the planning sector, how about an internationally agreed definition?

Interestingly the RTPI is currently working on a paper which states that climate change must now be recognised as the fundamental driver behind sustainable development. The paper has as its basic premise that climate change mitigation should be prioritised over economic, environmental and social factors. This may yet prove to be too controversial.

So let me end by trying to sum up the key points. We have a new Government intent on reforming the planning system. Our national level of planning will be slimmed down. Regional planning has largely gone. Plans and proposals initiated by local communities will lead the way.

For us as a professional institute there are a number of opportunities. We will continue to hold a dialogue with politicians as this engagement is key. We will continue to campaign for spatial planning at the appropriate level be that at national or regional level.

Our Government has told people to get on with it. **We can show leadership by getting on with it, by ensuring that sustainable development, however defined, and climate change are at the top of the agenda not regarded as some separate idea, but connected and embedded into the social, economic and environmental issues we care so deeply about, by being prepared with the right skills sharing best practice and by supporting and enabling communities to formulate their ideas and plans ensuring that the many different voices are heard.**

And so we must act together as we are doing here in Montreal to set out what we believe in because we have a **deep seated belief in the very positive role our profession can play.**

Thank you very much.