

# ROYAL TOWN PLANNING INSTITUTE

## GENERAL ASSEMBLY

**Notes:** of a meeting of the General Assembly held at Prospero House, 241 Borough High Street, London, SE1 1GA on Wednesday 26 May 2010.

**Present:** Janthia Algate, Ian Angus, Janet Askew, David Barraclough, Chris Berry, Jan Bessell, Craige Burden, Ken Burley, David Chapman, Jim Claydon, Michael Crossley, Nick Davies, John Downey, Peter Geraghty, Vincent Goodstadt, Jed Griffiths, Kath Haddrell, Mike Hayes, Colin Haylock, Bernadette Hillman, Ann Hockey, Hazel McKay, Ismail Mohammed, Julie Morgan, Janice Morphet, Janet O'Neil, Hector Pearson, Cath Ranson, John Scott, Chris Shepley, Ann Skippers, Laura Smith, Graham Stallwood, Alistair Stark, Rosanna Sterry, Richard Summers, Ron Tate, Andrew Taylor, Martin Taylor, Alan Wenban-Smith, Tony Whitehead, Peter Wilbraham, Martin Willey, Richard Williamson.

**Apologies for absence:** David Marshall, James Morris, Wayne Reynolds, Leonora Rozee, Mark Southgate, Marie Stacey, Pat Thomas, David Worthington, Owain Wyn.

**Guests:** Peter Lerner (Peter Lerner Consultancy Ltd), Jonathan DeMello and Martin Summerscales (CB Richard Ellis) and John Turner (Northern Ireland representative).

**In attendance:** Sara Drake (Managing Director) and other members of RTPi staff.

### MORNING SESSION

#### Welcome

Ann Skippers, RTPi President welcomed everyone to the meeting, in particular to the new members of the General Assembly. This is a new style General Assembly, which has been guided by an advisory panel, under the chairmanship of Hazel McKay. She extended thanks to Hazel for pulling together the day's programme.

#### Item 1: Planning in an era of austerity – responding proactively to budgetary cuts

A short presentation was given by Peter Lerner.

Peter briefly outlined his planning experience, including recently held interim positions at four local authorities (LAs), holding him in good stead to understand the realities faced by planning teams in all LAs. He stressed that if planning does not provide strong leadership and work to wider LA priorities it will potentially suffer greater cuts. Planners need to be aware that planning is not seen as a priority in many LAs, especially when compared to departments like Children's Services. It isn't perceived in a positive light by elected members, often being seen as bureaucratic and holding-up development.

Planners will need to examine how much of their work is statutory, in order to form views of where cuts can be made. For example, work relating to conservation of

trees may initially be seen as an easy target for cuts, but are of real concern to local interest groups.

Peter went on to identify what is needed from the planning profession now. The Government's plans mean there will be a new modern local government and the new planning system will therefore need to adapt. This requires effective and aspiring leaders that will make a difference in moving the profession forward. He identified there is a missing generation of planners aged around 40, who can come to lead planning over the next 20 years. Planners who can work corporately and across different departments in order to deliver the best projects are vital. He suggested that changes to planning education are needed, with students currently being taught about the processes of planning, without any real understanding of why planning is being carried out. It is clear that community engagement is a priority for the new Government so planners need to adapt to this way of working.

Peter suggested that planners need to celebrate publicly their own talents and successes, as there is a tendency to hide their light under a bushel and assume others understand the important role they play. Barriers need to be broken down between departments, the public-private sector and other bodies, so that planners are no longer accused of working in "silos". Negative perceptions about planning are a major barrier and work must be carried out to address these. One approach is by demonstrating how planners manage projects and ensure things happen.

Peter highlighted the need for more training for planners particularly relating to leadership, community engagement, and working across sectors. But training budgets will be the first to be cut, so the profession needs to think about ways to maintain training and professional development, particularly in the face of likely changes to the system. However, fulfilling this need is larger than any educational establishment or LA and therefore he felt the RTPI should take a lead role.

Peter concluded by encouraging the RTPI to be leaders in a step change to ensure planning is at the forefront of delivering communities' aspirations.

Following the presentation GA members split into break-out groups to discuss questions based on the presentation.

**1. How can we best promote planning and spare cuts in services in order to keep planning well-resourced if an organisation's budget is cut by: (a) 10% and (b) 40%?**

Rapporteur: Julie Morgan.

The group split the question into two sections:

Planning needs to be promoted;

- It is essential, but too complicated for non-planners: it needs to be simplified;
- 30 years ago people were able to see the changes planning made, meaning there was a more positive perception, we need to learn lessons from the past;
- There is a perception by elected members of a tick-box culture, particularly with development management;
- We should look towards zoning and codifying planning to make it simpler and more transparent;
- We need to start from a level playing field.

#### Budget cuts

- Maximise joint plans and services between planning authorities
- Better coordination between services such as health and economic development that have wider benefits and improved skills for planners are needed.

### **2. In what ways can we get the most out of reduced resources, do savings have to mean a decline in the level or range of services offered and which planning services would we be expected to protect and why?**

Rapporteur: Janice Morphet

- The range of services can be protected if they are delivered in different ways; possibly by combining services e.g. consultation exercises, economic development or some householder applications being approved under the building control system;
- 80% of planning applications are submitted with errors. The pre-application advice available could be extended. New ways of offering a pre-application checking service (like the check and send service provided by the post office for passports) should be examined, speeding up the service and possibly acting as a source of revenue;
- IT systems should be improved and at-desk training by colleagues, to improve efficiency, should be organised;
- Consultation will continue to be important (Duty to Involve); Plymouth have found that investment up-front has meant savings at the end of the process;
- Planning managers need to share information and best practice;
- A 'speed dating' approach to consultation in Devon has been a successful and a cost effective new way for planners to engage with communities.

### **3. How should planning prioritise their activities to meet the public's expectations and planner's aspirations whilst protecting services and keeping it in good shape to help the country's economic recovery?**

Rapporteur: Kath Haddrell

- Planners need to find out what their communities' aspirations are, through surveys, market research, etc and accept that it might include other things (such as bin collection, street cleaning, etc) and that they might not want change. It is the planner's role to facilitate change and manage expectations;
- Planning needs to be more public facing;
- Need to share good practice;
- Need greater links with economic development and regeneration departments, that are carrying out aspects of planning;
- Suggest agents' forums as they are seen as positive;
- Need more cross-sectoral working and partnerships;
- Planners are looked upon to coordinate and deliver;
- Need to follow the Cam-Clegg philosophy and explore differences between planners' and community expectations and work with commonalities.

### **4. How do we maintain planning's necessary specialist skills base or are multi-skills and multi-tasking the way to go? In what way can we ensure the retained skills work together for maximum public benefit in such lean times?**

Rapporteur: Peter Geraghty

- Current situation is nothing new: we should learn from previous lessons of reorganisations and budget cuts and adapt to what's happening now;
- Planners need to be responsive to Government and adapt services to their aspirations;
- Can the RTPI develop skills around change management and the impact of the recession to assist planners, particularly managers?
- Planners are well equipped to adapt to change;
- Planners need new skills around climate change, economic assessment, flood management, etc;
- The RTPI should reinstate the unemployed planners' register;
- There has been a split in planning between policy and development management, with policy being drawn into the centre, and development management with regulation. Localism offers an opportunity to draw the two aspects of planning back together;
- In the past planners had traineeships, where graduates moved around the planning department, giving them a range of planning experience (policy, development management, enforcement, building control, etc). This should be reintroduced and the importance of well rounded experience stressed;
- Planners may need to develop a 'specialism' on top of their day-to-day job;
- The achievement of young planners gaining chartered membership of the RTPI should be celebrated by planning committees as a way of promoting membership of the RTPI.

**5. As a consequence of less resources, how can we streamline spatial planning to remain effective? Are there aspects that we could stop and if so which?**

Rapporteur: Graham Stallwood

- As a profession we need to be more radical and be utterly different in our approach compared to the last 15-20 years;
- It is likely LAs will be working horizontally, rather than vertically within the next 5 years, and it is possible there won't be a 'planning department' or 'head of planning';
- Government needs to be convinced that planning can provide certainty and stability. The system doesn't need to be reinvented, just that it can learn from its mistakes, to deliver the coalition government's vision and agenda;
- Planners need to be asking 'what we are doing and why', and to make the system work;
- There is a need to focus on key areas where a difference can be made, rather than the existing way of working of exhaustive completeness;
- Some good collaborative work is being carried out, but others are just duplicating effort. Clever toolkits should be developed
- What we can learn from the devolved nations?
- Spatial planning aspect of RSSs – it is important to retain skills and knowledge when they are dissolved at the local level to ensure continued collaboration across borders;
- Most planners don't read their sustainable community strategies, and know nothing about their local LAAs or MAAs – these are all linked to developing the LDF and should be well understood by planners;
- Value added – do we need to do so much (i.e. do we need to consult so many people?);

- Front loading – developers have a key role in the development process and need to be working with LPAs to enable planners to make decisions.

### **Plenary discussion**

Key points from the discussion that followed were:

- Ron Tate questioned what can GA offer the Institute's members (particularly the unemployed) and whether we should consider reinstating the unemployment register?
- PG – development management PPS – planning authorities do it, not just planners. Need more collaboration and planners need to be at the beginning of the process
- Martin Taylor – PINS are advising on LDFs before examination of evidence base and this holds up the process
- AWS – localism offers opportunity to deliver more with less by not following national guidelines
- CR – need more collaboration – Wales have up-skilling programme for all public sector and this should be considered in England
- KH – in responding to Martin's comment: PINS consistently says there is too much evidence and isn't it better to highlight issues prior to examination rather than it being found unsound?
- Alistair Stark – new government agenda could spread to devolved nations. RTPI is in a good position as an international organisation & we should use those strengths to base sound arguments and find ways to influence
- The President - the RTPI needs to show leadership
- CH – there is some exceptionally good practice and we need more heroes and heroines to stand up and promote planning and planners
- JC – we need to consider medium to long term. The new government is likely to introduce new local democracy and we need to be well placed to adapt. Planners must let go of the last government's top down approach and embrace the new model, and possibly using *Planning Aid*
- JG – do not throw out strategic planning and regional planning!

The President then wrapped-up the discussion highlighting some of the issues raised such as the need for new skills, improving planning's image, leadership, using practical examples, how not to get stuck in process and how we need to think about the bigger picture.

Peter Lerner – there are going to be big changes in local government which could include possible elected heads of departments (including planning). Chief Executives and Leaders are not interested in promoting planning, but are interested in delivery and services so planners need to use that as a way in. Combining services: the more it is done the more we are moving in the right direction. Training will be important. The RTPI should not duplicate PAS (good practice) but rather focus on promoting planning.

### **Item 2: General Assembly business**

Richard Summers gave a short presentation. Further details can be found in the Director General's report.

Hazel McKay, as the new chair, spoke briefly about the Audit Committee. She thanked David Marshall for his hard work as previous chair and the meeting applauded his contribution. She informed GA that this year the committee will focus

on a few big issues (i.e. the risk register, the Board's handling of important issues and a review of how effectively the Institute employs the human resources available to the organisation) Minutes from the first meeting are still being finalised.

Questions from the floor:

- CS – unsure about what the Institute is doing post-election regarding communications strategy – thought this GA would be the best time to discuss it
- RS – the board are working on a communications strategy
- Andrew Millard – we have been engaging with senior civil servants, we have issued several press releases and we are preparing a joint statement with the agreement of POS and the TCPA on regional planning. Andrew then read out a brief extract from the proposed statement which captured the spirit of it in a nutshell: ***“We are joining together to urge the Coalition Government to work with us in devising alternative approaches to locally based strategic planning before it dismantles the existing system.”***
- Chris Berry – planning is under significant pressure, his LPA just decided to cut the planning budget by 15% this year and 20% next year. Concerned about the Institute's lack of engagement with its members, and potential members (those working as planners who have no interest in joining the RTPI), particularly as we are in a very important political debate. He would like to see the RTPI do an audit of LPA planners and determine why they aren't members and what would make them join. We must connect with our members and potential members.
- Sue Percy – Institute has been doing surveys on some of the issues Chris raised. Proposals around membership classes are being prepared to get more members. The Membership and Ethics Board are looking at the limited resources and deciding what the RTPI should focus on regarding attracting more members.

It was noted that Judy Woollett was retiring at the end of May after 20 years service.

LUNCH BREAK followed by the ...

AFTERNOON SESSION

### **Item 3: How has the internet changed retail/commerce? What are the implications for the high street, rural communities and for spatial planning?**

A short presentation was given by Jonathan DeMello.

Jonathan began by outlining how internet connection and usage has changed in recent years. Household access to broadband now stands at over 70 percent, but there are regional differences and access in rural areas is still much lower, which has important implications for planning. Internet usage also depends on age, with a significant drop off in use with people aged over 65. There are also different usage habits between men and women, for example women are twice as likely to buy groceries online than men.

He went on to discuss the contribution internet shopping makes to total retail spending in the UK. Total online spending in 2009 was £23.5 billion, more than the combined turnovers of John Lewis, Marks and Spencer's, Next, Debenhams and House of Fraser combined. It is therefore a very important medium.

Jonathan's presentation then went on to focus on the implications of these high internet sales for retail centres. There are a number of potential threats including, lower levels of footfall, and resulting lower sales may also occur, especially for non-anchor tenants. Retailers of books, music and games are already disappearing from the high street. Purchasing decisions are influenced by the internet, as product information is more readily available and price comparison is easier to carry out. These factors can result in lower profit margins for tenants and eventually higher vacancies. Jonathan argued that these affects would not be felt uniformly across the country and would be experienced more in areas with high internet usage like London which has a young population and high internet use. CBRE has been able to categorise people into 60 mosaic types, who each have different internet habits. This information can then be drawn down to identify where different mosaic types live and the likely impact on local shopping centres.

The impact of the internet on rural areas was discussed in more detail. It is perceived that the internet is more important for shopping in rural, than in urban areas. However this doesn't take account of the lower levels of access to broadband in rural areas, a generally older population, that many rural centres are leisure driven and that a greater proportion of trips to rural centres are driven by non retail functions than in urban areas.

Jonathan concluded the presentation by outlining how CBRE uses modelling techniques to calculate the current and future catchment areas and spend potential for major comparison goods shopping centres. By converting this spend potential into capacity and using future scenario analysis the future floorspace needs of the retail centre can be assessed. There is likely to be a high impact on the amount of floorspace needed in some areas of high internet usage.

Following the presentation GA members split into break-out groups to discuss questions based on the presentation.

Discussion points:

- Hazel M: need to consider the requirements for picking up goods
- JM: out of town – delivery hubs and local distribution systems need to be considered. Tesco, Next, M&S, able to fill orders in-store and they did better when there was an in-store pick-up service. CBRE are talking to some current online stores about opening shops.
- Janet Askew: findings in PHD identified that many use the internet to browse and then shop for it in person (especially for clothing).
- MS: Shopping centres need to evolve
- Graham: some trade internet from shops. Also impact on price as internet is able to offer lower prices as overheads are lower
- Janet O'Neil: highlighted vitality i.e. markets
- JM advised that information on footfall can be derived from security cameras
- JC: eBay and the secondhand internet market is increasing
- CS: impact on the credit crunch – superficially think the impact on internet shopping is negative but this may not be the case
- JM: greater trend to work from home, particularly in rural areas, what is the impact on transport?

Following the plenary discussion the members split into break-out groups to discuss questions based on the presentation.

**1. In what ways have shopping habits changed as a result of the internet, what is the role of town centres nowadays and will shopping remain the primary function of a town centre?**

Reported back by Martin Taylor

- It's not just the internet having an impact [on shopping] but also the recession. There may also be an impact on regional centres and parking issues
- Town centres need more than just shops to survive. Those with commercial, admin, cultural activities as well are better placed and planners need to be instrumental in achieving this mix
- There is a drift to single manufacture shops e.g. Sony, Apple, etc with no middle man and therefore they can afford higher rents in prime locations

**2. What are the implications of increased demand for out-of-town distribution warehousing and "pick-up" centres particularly on transport infrastructure and rural communities?**

Reported back by Janthia Algate

- No longer district centre in NI therefore the implications mean that everything sent from England have higher costs and are not sustainable.
- Pick-up centres are convenient
- Railway deliveries are used a lot in Cornwall
- Warehousing being built beside motorways and on green belt. More research is needed into the implications of this type of development
- Existing facilities should be used as pick-up points, which are convenient. Retail parks are only accessible by car. Liability and insurance issues.
- Docks should be investigated
- Access to broadband is limited in rural areas

**3. How does planning guidance PPS4 (Planning for Prosperous Economies) need to adapt to retailing's ever changing profile including town centres, rural communities, transport and industry?**

Reported back by Cath Ranson

- Fuel costs is the biggest factor
- Link to Grotton revisited
- Rural areas in which independent operators gain and lose
- Transition towns, farmers markets, fresh produce cooperative, building on quality and locality
- PPS4 didn't pick up health issues

**4. In light of e-tailing, which are more important to the survival of town centres and why: a cinema, coffee bar, department store or professional services?**

Reported back by Janet O'Neil

- What is meant by survival – tip top stores or charity shops
- Vital role to play - need wide offering , pleasant experience, otherwise more likely to shop from home
- Department stores are good anchors but need good range.

- Smaller towns are more likely to have independents and the shops are a designations in themselves
- Character in town centres change, whole package including parks, parking, pubs

**5. What new approaches to town centre planning are required as a result of the internet and is eating, drinking and leisure now more important than conventional retail outlets?**

Reported back by Laura Smith

- Town centres are changing, greater leisure activities
- Leisure creates vitality and evening economy. The A use classes become out dated
- National policy moving toward mix uses e.g. use empty shops for offices
- Bespoke – moving away from big retailers
- Drinking culture – no go areas of city centres at night. There are a variety of people who go out at night including for dinner or to watch a movie/theatre, etc

Plenary discussion

- Vincent: most of what has been said is not new. There is a mismatch between where the market wants to go and where planning wants to go. The 4 biggest retailers want to more larger department stores. The regional impact needs to be taken into account as changes are happening fast, planning could be left behind.
- AWS: need to be very careful about the amount of floorspace permitted and zoning plus lifestyle changes need to be considered.

**Special item: General Assembly reaction to ‘Building the Big Society’**

Jim Claydon led a short debate on the Government proposals outlined in the ‘Building the Big Society’ document.

He started the debate by going through the bullet points listed including:

- We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live.
- We will introduce new powers to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and give communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services.
- We will promote the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government, including a full review of local government finance.
- We will give councils a general power of competence.
- We will abolish Regional Spatial Strategies and return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils.

Jim asked the GA what they didn't agree with contained in the document.

CR – The initial stages of the West Midlands RSS worked well, with local collaboration rather than an imposition nationally. However, when it was seen to be working well and taken over by the RA it became complicated

RS – yes want national planning framework, no don't want regional planning taken away. Good regional frameworks are on the way but it is recognised they do need improving.

Nick – without top down quotas from RSS, LAs won't provide enough housing to meet the needs of their local areas to adequately house the population and support economic growth because of political opposition

JM – every LA will be contracted to provide housing . This is just the same system but cast in a different way.

JA – localism won't happen in the way it suggests as there are too many contradictions. Take, for example, schools. JA felt things will happen in a self-interested way whereas planning should be about the greater good.

AWS – performance requirements must be placed on RSSs

HM – finds the document uplifting. Local authority chief planners should have the confidence and competence to address the needs of their local areas which the localism agenda allows for them to do.

DB – yes to RSS. Don't agree with the view they don't work. Process on NE went well until the end of the process and the approval. The principles of LDFs is right but they are incredibly complicated.

CH - wonderful opportunity for *Planning Aid* and what it can offer Government. Need to ask question "When will localism deliver a Gypsy and Traveller site or meet housing figures?" Recognise benefits and shortcomings of localism agenda

Alistair Stark – Vincent Goodstadt's LA is an example of how good strategic planning has transformed an area and how many billions of pounds it can deliver. Powerful tool if used properly.

MT – if we don't agree with one aspect of the proposals that shouldn't prevent us from saying we are here to help - we can deliver planning

Matt Thomson – strategic planning issue and hence the joint statement mentioned earlier by Andrew is being presented to Eric Pickles this evening making a strong case to retain skills at a regional level.

JC summarised:

- We welcome the proposal to introduce a national planning framework
- There is a need for regional level planning (and good examples of practice to draw on) but GA is not wedded to the current system.
- We welcome the freedom to be given to local government but are concerned to ensure that national objectives and infrastructure are delivered
- The local planning system is not working properly and needs adjustment but it is important to ensure that the ability to deliver housing and make other difficult decisions are not jeopardised by changes
- We welcome greater emphasis on communities in plan making and believe that in *Planning Aid* we have both experience and expertise to assist communities and the government in fulfilling this aspiration.

In conclusion, the RTPI wishes to engage in constructive dialogue with government to help shape planning policy and we should put emphasis on what we as an expert institution have to offer.

The meeting ended just after 4pm.