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BRIEFING PAPER



PRESIDENTS' COLLOQUIUM: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL APPROACHES TO PLANNING

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INTRODUCTION

The President's Colloquium took place on the evening of 9 March in Edinburgh to discuss community engagement in local approaches to planning. The colloquium was chaired by Richard Summers, President of the Royal Town Planning Institute, and involved a group of people from a wide range of planning backgrounds:

- Petra Biberbach, Planning Aid for Scotland
- John Bury, City of Edinburgh Council
- Hugh Crawford, Sir Frank Mears Associates
- Julia Frost, Junior Vice Convenor, RTPI in Scotland/ Turley Associates
- Marilyn Higgins, Heriot Watt University
- Les Huckfield, Les Huckfield Associates
- Diarmaid Lawlor, Architecture + Design Scotland
- Suzanne McIntosh, Planning Consultant, Mediator and Urban Designer
- Craig McLaren, RTPI in Scotland
- Nikola Miller, RTPI Edinburgh, Lothian, Borders and Fife Chapter
- Bob Reid, Senior Vice Convenor RTPI in Scotland/ Halliday Fraser Munro
- Graham Robinson, Directorate of the Built Environment, Scottish Government
- Stefano Smith, Halcrow
- Charles Strang, RTPI in Scotland
- Richard Summers, RTPI
- David Suttie, Convenor, RTPI in Scotland/ Dumfries and Galloway Council

DISCUSSION

Richard outlined how we have been keen to learn from good practice in Scotland, so that this could be shared across other parts of the UK. In particular he was keen to hear about approaches to local community planning; about how to work with the 'hard to reach'; and to discuss approaches to neighbourhood planning in Scotland.

SELDOM HEARD VOICES

The point was made about how we should talk about the 'seldom heard' rather than the 'hard to reach', given the importance of language in engagement. Young people were identified as a key group given the benefit they bring to a community and as future decision makers. However, it was felt that they are not involved in the planning system or its processes to any great degree. The Planning Aid for Scotland "IMBY" (In My Back Yard) project which works in schools was highlighted as an innovative and successful approach to engaging positively with young people.

There was a mention of the need to support local people to be able to do things rather than merely responding to things. A question was posed on whether a plan drawn up and published by a local community would be considered a material consideration?

PROFESSIONALISM

The importance of emphasising the professional expertise required for good planning was pointed out, with a need to differentiate between professional advice and political decision

making. The need to promote planning as an enabler for change, which provides proactive guidance on future development was discussed in this context. This led to discussion on the poor public perception of the planning profession and the conclusion that planning was often now seen as a 'secondary' profession.

That said, it was felt that the current Cabinet Secretary in Scottish Government recognised and valued planning. There was a plea that we don't talk down the planning profession and that we stress the positives, including its complementarity with other disciplines involved in the built environment and how planners are 'specialists in finding synergy'.

It was pointed out however, that there is a need for planning and planners to be more visionary and for us to show that we are capable of supporting delivery. There are examples of this, but we need to demonstrate more effectively how planning can help to stimulate and support economic development.

In general, it was felt that planners are keen and enthusiastic - 15% of the planning profession in Scotland volunteer through Planning Aid for Scotland – but there is still a need to support culture change to create a more positive approach to supporting sustainable change.

MEDIATION

There was a discussion about the role of mediation in planning. This was something that was happening across a range of other activities. This would not necessarily focus on dispute resolution at the planning application end of the system, but would better be focussed more 'upstream' in development planning. This, in turn, could lead to fewer disputes at later stages.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PLANS

It was pointed out that Community Planning in Scotland was a very different thing from community planning in England. In Scotland Community Planning is focussed on bringing together the key public sector partners to join up approaches, programmes and funding. Although Community Planning Partnerships were obliged to consult communities they were not generally seen as key players in the process. Some felt that spatial planning was not integrated to the extent which it should be with Community Planning.

Unlike in England, the Scottish Government had no proposals to introduce local community development plans. Despite the differences between Scotland and England, it was agreed that community engagement in planning is a good thing and one which is supported by the very large majority of the planning profession in Scotland.

In discussion it was felt that there is a need to manage expectations of communities regarding their involvement in decision making at a local level. Questions were asked if there are appropriate local structures below the local authority level – organisations, processes and expertise - that would be capable of pulling together local development plans? It was felt that currently the coverage of community councils was patchy and even where there was a community council in place, they generally would not be capable of creating a community development plan given a lack of resources, expertise and perspective on the complex issues which provided the context for any such plan.

There was a discussion as to whether communities understood that there would be a need to 'buy in' consultancy support and technical support if they were to draw up community development plans. It would be difficult for community councils or community bodies to fund this and it is unclear if they would get support from elsewhere. This was particularly important given the increasing need for evidence - communities would need independent expertise and resources to gather this. There would also need to be clarity on the role of consultants in such activity.

There are good examples of communities working with partners from other sectors to develop achievable visions for their neighbourhoods and towns such as the Neilston Renaissance project in East Renfrewshire.

In general there was feeling that community engagement is best placed more 'upstream' in the planning process, although it was appreciated that this is often difficult as communities could have difficulty engaging or commenting on a vision rather than a specific and tangible proposal.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Broader community empowerment was discussed, including the importance of Community Development Trusts. It was felt that these are working with notable successes in rural parts of Scotland, but that they were less effective in urban areas. Land reform has been very important, almost revolutionary, and has helped development trusts to have responsibility for assets and for taking control of the future of their communities. But, again, this has not taken hold in urban Scotland.

The question was asked as to whether we needed to confront perceptions that communities interfere and promote their own narrow agenda? Also, it was pointed out that we need to make sure that all structures and processes which aim to represent communities are linked into planning process. At the moment this is not always the case.

Community Based Housing Associations were mentioned as excellent vehicles for community-led approaches to regeneration and development. They have assets, income streams through rents, community control through Boards of Directors and they are regulated to provide investors with confidence. The question was, how connected are they to the planning system and vice versa?

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

There was a discussion about the Charrettes which have been taking place in Scotland. Key points in using Charrettes were the need to set a long time frame for the visioning; to focus discussion around 5 or 6 key areas or themes; and to use them to change the focus from planning process to the outcomes you want. The importance of leading with confidence through the Charrette process was stressed as was the need to appropriately manage the expectations of those who had engaged. There may be complex issues around land assembly, for example, that will need to be resolved to attain the vision.

It was asked whether planners had the skills sets to undertake effective community engagement. It was pointed out there were a range of tools and resources available to

support people to undertake community engagement such as those developed Planning Aid for Scotland, National Standards for Community Engagement and VOICE. The key issue was creating a culture which valued and supported community engagement in the planning process.

FURTHER RESOURCES

A number of case studies of good practice in community engagement in planning can be found on the Scottish Government website:

- [Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan](#)
- [Consultation in Relation to the Main Issues Report - Community Council Toolkits](#)
- [Consultation in Relation to the Main Issues Report - The Pod](#)
- [Development Plan Scheme](#)
- [Local Development Plan Consultation at Local Music Festival](#)
- [Local Development Plan Newsletter](#)
- [Public Consultation on Orkney Local Development Plan Main Issues Report](#)
- [Robert Gordon University New Campus Development](#)
- [TAYPlan Main Issues Report](#)
- [Using Local Media to Promote Planning Awareness/Good Practice](#)
- [Using SP=EED to Ensure Public and Stakeholder Engagement for Major Planning Application](#)

Planning Aid for Scotland
www.planningaidscotland.org.uk

National Standards for Community Engagement
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/engage/standards>

VOICE (Visioning Outcomes in Community Engagement)
<http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/voice/>

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- support policy development to improve approaches to planning for the benefit of the public
- maintain the professional standards of our members
- support our members, and therefore the majority of the planning workforce, to have the skills and knowledge they need to deliver planning effectively
- maintain high standards of planning education
- develop and promote new thinking, ideas and approaches which can improve planning
- support our membership to work with others who have a role in developing places in Scotland
- improve the understanding of planning and the planning system to policy makers, politicians, practitioners and the general public.

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