

Strategic Planning - What Next?

As the title suggests, at the time, and continuing to date there appears to be some confusion as to what form Strategic Planning is to take in the new era of coalition government. To help clarify, Strategic Planning – What Next? was organised by the RTPI East of England. The event heard from speakers including the RTPI President Richard Summers, RTPI Head of Policy Matt Thompson, Tim Jones and Kevin Leigh of No 5 Chambers, James Cutting of Lawson Planning Partnership and the Phil Morris of Norfolk County Council & the Greater Norwich Development Partnership. All set in the pleasant setting of Hugh's College, Cambridge.

With the Localism Bill being the big game in town this event focused on where the Government, through the Localism Bill is (or depending on the time of reading, was) taking planning. Each of the speakers gave their individual perspective on where the profession is going. In brief:

Speaking first **Matt Thomson** gave a talk on the RTPI's stance to the localism bill. He expanded on the positive approach that the RTPI has been taking in trying to influence government policy, and illustrated this with the campaign the RTPI led of 30 international and national organisations with the objective of ensuring that the need for strategic planning was recognised, even if it was under the guise of "larger than local" planning.

James Cutting followed, he spoke on the topic of what the new roles of county and district councils will be in the future. He summarised that there is going to be an ongoing need for strategic planning as required by assorted European directives and planning policy guidance / statements. With this need established, there may be some refocusing within councils, but largely the skills required are those that already exist in the profession and will need sharpening to make the most of the localism agenda.

After a short intermission **Tim Jones** and **Kevin Leigh** then gave two presentations, both taking form of crystal ball gazing each with a slightly different focus. The former entitled The Future of Strategic Planning predicting that in 2012 a pro-growth, NPPF would be issued with increased protection for national designations; Regional Strategies will be formally abolished; and that through a duty to co-operate there would be some policy formation at a multi-LPA level. The latter presentation focused on what would be coming for the development industry. This largely concluded that in the short term there would be uncertainty in the construction industry, and without major policy changes the industry would remain cautious in its approach.

The morning was concluded with a panel discussion led by **Rob Hobbs**. This thought provoking discussion covered many perceived issues that are expected to arise from the Localism bill. While this particular discussion was unable to reach many conclusions, it did lay a good basis for the afternoon, which did yield quite a satisfying conclusion.

The afternoon session opened with **Phil Morris** illustrating the work of the Greater Norwich Development Partnership. He focused on the benefits of having a single body that was able to work across boundaries, and their successes.

Richard Summers gave the final talk of the day. He spoke on the topic of what developers want from the planning system. The conclusions of this were that the development industry desired certainty in both the planning system and the property market, and the best solution to this was for the development industry to work closely with planners.

The final part of the afternoon was dedicated to a general discussion. Led by **Richard Summers** this discussion brought together all of the individual strands into satisfying coherent message. This discussion opened with a slow start focusing on the issues expected as a result of the localism bill, which mostly centred on concerns over the duty to cooperate and the presumption in favour of sustainable development. In contrast to the previous discussion that just circled the expected problems; this one took an interesting turn.

By considering the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the duty to cooperate together it was possible to see how they could potentially interact with each other. The discussion followed this logic: if there is no plan then the presumption in favour of sustainable development could lead to unwanted development, this in turn would lead to pressure for a plan to be provided; in the preparation of any plan the authority would have to demonstrate that they had complied with the duty to cooperate, or their plan would be found not sound; in isolation this second part may seem problematic, but neighbouring authorities would be in a similar position, and it would be a very short sighted if an authority decided not to cooperate. Experience suggests that even with the best plans, there will always be occasions where things just do not work, but this should be an exception rather than the norm.

Strategic Planning – What Next? provided a good overview of the current thinking, and as discussed during the day, contained within that thinking that there is a core of good strong ideas. The idea of decisions being made as close to local level as possible; the idea of ~~regional and sub-regional~~, sorry, “Larger than Local” boundaries being flexible, to change with time, held together by a duty to cooperate; and the idea of encouraging neighbourhood to be engaged in forward planning. All of these are good strong concepts that should stand the test of time. The proposed implementation of these is rough around the edges at the moment, but it is my suspicion that it’s a very rare occasion when a policy maker looks at emerging policy and declares: “It’s perfect!” And while it is emerging policy, it is just that, it is not the final copy. It will take time to understand what is intended, how it will work in practice, the implications of it, and what unintended consequences there may be. Keep an eye out for future conferences which may be able to help with that.

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