

## **Spatial Planning Adapting to Climate Change**

**Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2011**

**BDP, Ducie Street, Manchester**

A total of 25 delegates attended this RTPI North West Update event, held, by courtesy of BDP, at what is rapidly becoming one of the region's favourite CPD venues. The vast majority of delegates came from across 14 North West local authorities, with the private sector only thinly represented.

**Matt Ellis** from the Environment Agency North West organised and chaired the event. In his introduction, Matt outlined the current position of climate change within the planning agenda and questioned how far it remained a Government imperative in the present economic situation. Some planners still believe it to be a 'Cinderella' within the planning system, despite a clear commitment to it, on paper at least, including the RTPI guide 'Planning to live with climate change: our seven commitments'.

Matt also considered the 2 and 4 degree centigrade 'guardrails', indicating that major impacts will occur between these thresholds, and setting out the physical limits to potential climate change adaptation, the behavioural constraints that influence where we live and why, and the financial constraints at times of economic stress.

Despite the 2008 Climate Change Act in the UK, atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases are increasing and governments must address the economic, environmental and social aspects of climate change and biodiversity, simultaneously. The 'right' mix of policies, practices, technologies and behavioural changes is required. Changes in the planning profession have led to a 30-40% drop in resources available for climate change. The draft NPPF includes a key statement about it, but there are no details provided and locally specific responses will prove crucially important.

**Jeremy Carter** a Research Fellow working within the School of Environment and Development and the Centre for Urban and Regional Ecology at the University of Manchester, outlined some of his research findings from across three research projects operating at sub-regional and international scales (Eco Cities; GRaBS (1); Climate Proof Cities) and what the implications might be for people and places.

Using Manchester as an example, Jeremy was able to demonstrate that in the Oxford Road Corridor, for example, increasing the amount of green space from its current 15% to 34% could significantly reduce surface temperatures by 6% in what is a warming trend across the city. This could have significant implications for the many planners currently viewing and planning for major urban sites. If, on the other hand, green space were to be reduced to 4%, then a 5% increase in surface temperature would be the most likely result.

It is important to identify the various spatial groups for whom climate change would have differing impacts. Planners have a key role in not only identifying areas vulnerable to climate change, but also in adapting to it. Climate change needs to become more fully embedded in planning practice and will vary from place to place, being place specific. The key barriers to implementations are:-

- Political commitment.
- Market pressures.
- Government hiatus over the way forward in an age of austerity.
- Structure of the planning system.
- Detailed daily working of the planning system.
- Greater spread of public awareness.
- Need to show clearer economic benefits if funding is to be secured.

A team of researchers from the University of Sheffield, led by **Mel Burton**, outlined the work that is taking place in the URSALA project (Urban River Corridors and Sustainable Living Agenda). Based on the River Don catchment, it is changing both spaces and places, with research covering integrated and innovative interaction in urban river corridors, tested by gathering evidence in Sheffield. It is connected to a major regeneration initiative by Sheffield City Council.

Other members of the team were **Sarah Moore, Lewis Gill and Jim Rouquette** and they in turn elaborated on other aspects of the project, including design option scenarios and their assessment; the importance of integrating all aspects of the project and useful three-dimensional landscape modelling to determine potential change. It would be useful to get the views of Sheffield City Council planners on progress to date and the extent to which other planning authorities might be able to use the research findings in combating climate change.

The morning session was concluded with a **discussion session** focussed around the earlier presentations. The delegates were responsive and amongst issues that emerged were the importance of political masters and national guidance from central government, including the loss of RSS which had already included considerable work in this field, much of it still intact. Priorities for the future included:-

- The importance of a strategic framework at sub-regional level.
- Technical assistance and support through regulation and good practice advice.
- Active support from developers.
- Technological advances.
- Member training and guidance.
- Checklists for use in DC/DM and in building control.
- The current absence of any Government belief in and support for spatial planning.
- The economic consequences of climate change and the implications of floods and a shortage of housing land.

The **afternoon session** was focussed on emerging planning responses. **Dr. Susannah Gill**, who develops approaches to green infrastructure planning at The Mersey Forest, outlined green infrastructure responses and emerging practice within the North West, covering what it is, how it helps to adapt to climate change, the availability of resources and the extent to which it is embedded in planning policy.

The Mersey Forest has produced a valuable set of resources that planners can access, including a Valuation Toolkit ([www.bit.ly/givavaluationtoolkit](http://www.bit.ly/givavaluationtoolkit)). The importance of designing in features which in the North West are principally to cope with both wet and heat, is important. Other guidance from The Mersey Forest includes 'Green infrastructure to combat climate

change' and a 'Toolkit for Developers'. It would be interesting to have further information on the take up by local planning authorities and developers, and how knowledge is got across to communities.

As far as embedding into planning policy is concerned, climate change adaptation and Green Infrastructure overlap. Rochdale, Liverpool and St. Helens are known to be amongst those taking up some of the thinking advocated by The Mersey Forest. Resources and information are freely available in the region.

**Ian Cooper**, a partner in Eclipse Research Consultants, an independent research consultancy focussed on the built environment and based in Cambridge, then posed 3 important questions:-

1. Is climate change adaptation a 'Cinderella' of the planning system?
2. Can planners in DC/DM access the information they require about climate change adaptation.
3. Do planners have the technical expertise to judge applications against climate change adaptation requirements? It is not always visually obvious whether buildings have been climate proofed, and sometimes it is done through pre-application discussions.

Ian focussed on the 'North West Climate Change Adaptations Briefing Guide', produced in 2010. It focussed on the key impacts on the built environment of climate change, and what can be done to adapt to them:-

- Identify that climate change is happening.
- Identify the impacts of these changes.
- List possible responses at biodiversity, neighbourhood and city scales.
- Locate where up-to-date information can be found on practically implementing the responses.
- Identify well-documented UK case studies.
- List local examples across the North West.

Further details may be found at [www.ginw.co.uk/climatechange](http://www.ginw.co.uk/climatechange).

The final session of the day was given by **Krista Patrick**, freelance consultant and CLASP Project Manager for the North West Climate Change Skills Fund. Patrick briefly outlined the support needs of planners provided by CLASP. Working primarily in small delegate groups, potential challenges and barriers were considered for individual planners across the region:-

- The importance of the evidence base.
- The danger of 'silo-working' when wider communication is beneficial.
- National leadership is currently diluted by the economic situation.
- Senior managers and political leadership are not as committed as might be expected.
- The impact on development viability.
- The need for a sharper and clearer policy framework to force people to do something.
- The resistance by developers to planner reconciliation.
- Who pays and who benefits from climate change adaptation.

- Overshadowed by other seemingly more pressing political priorities.
- An imperfect understanding of climate change adaptation issues.
- Recognising what climate proofed development looks like.
- Recognising how far best practice to date might be helpful.

### **Conclusion.**

There was some feeling at the end of the event that perhaps the audience had been a 'wrong' one! There was plenty of information around, notably prepared by CLASP and others, but planners could only go so far with it. Sooner or later they came up against a seemingly impenetrable barrier of senior management, local authority members, developers and on this occasion even the Planning Inspectorate.

How can the region best encourage people from these key sectors to attend regional CPD events and perhaps help break down or at least ease some of the blockages that are directly reducing the implementation agenda that should follow planning opinion? Short term economic and political factors are damaging the way forward and will need to be urgently addressed if the work of many coalface planners is to reach 'break through' on climate change. As planners, we know what should be done about climate change adaptation. It is just getting it done where the problem lies!

(1) Green and Blue Space Adaptation for Urban Areas and Eco Towns (GRaBS)

David Alexander,

November 2011.