

THE ROYAL TOWN PLANNING INSTITUTE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

NOTES of a meeting of the General Assembly held at Church House Conference Centre, London on Wednesday 23 January 2008.

PRESENT Jim Claydon (President), Janet O'Neill (Senior Vice-President), Martin Willey (Junior Vice-President), Vincent Goodstadt (Honorary Treasurer), Peter Wilbraham (Honorary Solicitor and Secretary).

Janthia Algate, Mike Ash, Janet Askew, Faraz Baber, David Barraclough, Chris Berry, Jan Bessell, Ken Burley, Heather Cheesbrough, Nick Davies, Joanne Dutton, Peter Geraghty, Clive Harridge, John Harvey, Mike Hayes, Colin Haylock, Kelvin Hinton, Robert Hobbs, Graham Holmes, Hazel McKay, David Marshall, Ismail Mohammed, Janice Morphet, Wayne Reynolds, Glyn Roberts, Carol Robinson, Chris Shepley, Ann Skippers, Graham Stallwood, Alistair Stark, Des Stephens, Richard Summers, Ron Tate, Andrew Taylor, Mark Tewdwr-Jones, Pat Thomas, David Twigg, Tony Whitehead, Peter Wilbraham, Owain Wyn.

Guests: John Baker, Linda Durnal, Bernadette Hillman, Mike Roberts.

In attendance: Robert Upton (Secretary General) and other RTPI members of staff.

Apologies for absence: Ian Anderson, David Chapman, Claire Dobinson, Sandra Fryer, Jed Griffiths, Philip Jackson, Mike Haslam, Cath Ranson, Leonora Rozee, John Scott, Alan Wenban-Smith, David Westhead.

Introduction

Jim Claydon welcomed all General Assembly members to the meeting, and in particular those members attending for whom it was their first meeting: Janet Askew, Robert Hobbs, Graham Holmes, Wayne Reynolds, Glyn Roberts, Graham Stallwood and David Twigg.

After a brief introduction from Jim, Rynd Smith, Director, Policy & Communications and Janice Morphet gave presentations on the topic of culture change and the National Planning Forum's work on the subject. Both presentations are attached.

Mike Hayes concluded the presentations by noting that the National Planning Forum is potentially a powerful vehicle for the Institute because it brings together all sectors, and thus creates

value by its ability to engender consensus across the sectors. It was necessary because of the problems CLG has faced when struggling with culture change in the past.

A major tension that needed to be acknowledged is between that of a professional institute and its view of what planning is for and about. It must be remembered that planning students are being trained in current procedures and legislation – not the panacea of planning that the Institute might envisage for the future.

For the Institute, there are three main areas to look at when considering culture change:

- (1) How does the Institute provide leadership in this area?
- (2) How do we measure competence in this evolving topic?
- (3) How do we demonstrate and research best and new practice in the field?

General Assembly members then broke up into five groups to discuss various elements of the topic of culture change and the specifics of the National Planning Forum draft report. Their conclusions were then outlined in a plenary session.

Group 1: Planning in place-shaping

Richard Summers reported that awareness of place-shaping is limited among stakeholders. To ensure planners are not always seen as the 'bad guy', greater consistency must be achieved.

The NPF report focuses more on local government rather than the private sector – this needs to be rectified. Politicians also need to be brought into the loop more than is currently the case.

Points 1.1 and 1.2, which advocate a role for CLG, are to be applauded, hopefully using the planning development grant.

Points 1.3 to 1.5, which promote leadership, information and training, are commendable; however, the baseline from which we are now working is unclear, wider based proposals were needed and the Institute should extend its services to members to help achieve desired results.

Group 2: Simplifying and demystifying planning

Heather Cheesbrough reported that there was a need to make LDFs, LAAs and corporate policy more aligned and understood in local authorities, a major problem being a lack of communication. Chief Executives need to feel confident that the LDF process is robust. At present it is not quick enough, mainly because planners are overwhelmed by bureaucracy.

Spatial planning needs to be communicated better to Institute members – it is a vision that encapsulates a difficult idea, but we should not apologise for that.

Group 3: Partnerships, vision and a less adversarial approach

Andrew Taylor reported that some felt an adversarial stance was inevitable. Proposed new processes will result in many potential issues being resolved in LSPs, but this will only happen if planning is at the heart of local authority change.

In the private sector, planners often take the lead in partnerships involving a number of different agencies. This is to be encouraged – greater working between the private and public sector is also desirable; furthermore, regional boundaries are also increasingly being crossed over, and so a more collaborate approach on all levels is needed.

Group 4: The learned and learning profession

Carol Robinson reported that communicating with planners in their workplaces was not easy – it was particularly difficult promoting the Institute within local authorities. Heads of Planning need to be more assertive in their dealings with Chief Executives; concerted campaigns to champion planning within, for example, schools should be advocated. The young and the more senior within local authorities are already widely aware of the Institute and its work – it is the group in the middle that need to be targeted.

Group 5: Identifying, promoting and celebrating success

Phil Grant questioned why his group only had four members – was it because members felt it wasn't an important enough issue or was it that they felt they didn't know how to address the topic?

The group felt that the report did not go far enough, although the suggestion of a best practice award was a good idea. There was a perception problem with planners – they were seen as just dealing with minutiae, in terms of minor development management issues, rather than addressing bigger longer term strategic policy objectives, when they should actually look at both. This perception problem extended to the media – planners were portrayed as being restrictive and greater engagement could help alleviate this negative view.

The group concluded with the belief that the report and how it is promoted was important – however it was important to recognise that public relations and communications required specialist skills and should not just be seen as 'bolt-on' functions to officers'

current job roles. Therefore proper investment is needed to achieve successful results.

A general discussion then took place. Mike Ash noted that his analysis of what the Institute needed to do had changed little since he made comments in 2002 on what was required. He felt that, whilst much had already been done, the Institute needed to focus on a small number of matters, rather than trying to do everything at once.

Kelvin Hinton felt that the various organisations representing planners do not always work together – the National Planning Forum could assist with this situation.

Alistair Stark noted that Scotland had faced the same problems as England, but the solutions that had been implemented were smaller. It required a wider discussion than just among the profession – the solutions had yet to yield real benefits, and the jury was therefore still out. A key factor of judging success will be the levels of community consultation.

Heather Cheesbrough felt that the Institute was not communicating how 'joined up' the process is – that it has a vision. The wider public see all the issues as not being separate – it needs to be got across that we are the ones creatively trying to join them up. Central government should be communicating this idea – with the Institute's guidance.

Faraz Baber said that, on the ground, there was a huge race to get basic principles in place, which is usually followed by a desire from those in senior positions to devise a strategy – planners therefore do the joined up thinking simply by doing their jobs – we are driving this agenda by virtue of what we do already.

It would be too prescriptive to design a set of rules for engineering change. The profession should not seem to want to be liked for the sake of it – in any event, politicians will always take the acclaim for any success, rather than giving credit to planners.

Debbie Sorkin, Director, Programmes & Services, noted that the situation was no different in Northern Ireland, where there was also no joined up government. The public perception is of negativity and regulation, mainly through their dealings with planners in the public sector; those in private practice often have a wider vision.

Glyn Roberts felt that the profession had changed in the last few years – it was important to remember that there is the planning process, but also a proliferation of different agencies that become involved. Those in the public sector are not motivated to become engaged with the wider profession, and the Institute needs to help

with that, through initiatives such as Learning Partners and Planners in the Workplace. Central government should also encourage planners to look outside of their own 'silo' and interact with planning colleagues more widely.

Jim Claydon concluded the debate by noting that there were a number of local authorities which were doing excellent work with planning staff and encouraging cross-sector debate and engagement.

Rynd Smith thanked General Assembly members for their contributions and requested that the five rapporteurs contacted him with any additional points that had not been raised here. From this the Institute will consider its position and the way forward.

At this point lunch was taken.

When the General Assembly reconvened, a presentation was given on the work of the Politicians in Planning Network (PIPA) by its chair, Councillor Mike Roberts. The presentation is attached to these notes.

Mike Roberts reported that there were now 250 members of the Network – it has quadrupled in size in the last twelve months.

In answer to a question from Heather Cheesbrough, Mike noted that Network Steering Group member Trevor Roberts was involved with training. Andrew Matheson reported that the availability of training options was disseminated through bulletins, which helped to prompt discussion; in addition IDeA had sponsored an event recently. Jim Claydon added that the Executive Board was keen for links to be forged with Town and Country Planning Summer School.

In response to a question from Colin Haylock, Mike said that there was potential for links with the Local Government Association, but at this stage the Network was looking to achieve a critical mass of members, as well as currently being overwhelmed by policy issues.

Mike agreed with the point made by Ken Burley that the value of elected mayors was questionable, but noted that a link already existed between the Network and the Mayor of London.

In response to a question from Peter Geraghty, Mike noted that there were several political viewpoints represented on the Steering Group but that, apart from election and budget calendar dates, politicians have to be able to work together.

In answer to a question from Glyn Roberts, Mike noted that cross-Network activity was taking place – Andrew Matheson gave the example of the web strand on the role of parish and town councils in local planning, which had involved PIPA and also members of the Planning with Communities Network.

Mike concluded by noting that, by being a member of this Network, you can be directly involved in policy formation, as well as enjoying a learning experience.

John Baker, Executive Director of Baker Associates and chair of the RTPI Development Planning Network then spoke to General Assembly members about development plans and the role of the network, all in the context of the need for culture change.

The Development Planning Network currently has 383 members across England Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all working to deliver desired change through the use of development plans.

Development plans are central to the planning system. They need to be strategic, decisive, dynamic, influential and effective but so far they have failed to fulfil this role. However the new development plans provide the opportunity for planners to take a lead role in producing plans that are spatial, inclusive and integrated in their strategies and implementation and are important central strategic document for local authorities.

John highlighted the problems with the current system in particular the basic tensions between participation and speed. He felt the requirement for soundness is a huge step forward, but also brings with it the possibility of failure that the profession has never had to deal with before. Inconsistencies and changing advice from the Government and PINS in its changed role have also had a significant impact on the system. Further changes are now underway as the Government consults on revised regulations and changes to a much shorter PPS12, which will be accompanied by a web-hosted and hence constantly developing manual.

John noted the importance of professional leadership, imagination and creativity within local authorities and related the problems experienced by the profession as all coming back to culture and the need for change. He questioned whether in fact culture change will take another generation to come about?

John informed members of the role that the Development Planning Network plays in helping planners effectively deliver the new planning system. The network looks at what works and shares the experience. It contributes to RTPI consultation responses, providing front-end experience and leading-edge knowledge. Network events deal with important issues and are an opportunity

to exchange ideas. The network is currently focusing on issues around spatial plans and transport planning, planning delivery and strategic policy and comparative learning across the nations.

Janet Askew, Head of the School of Planning and Architecture at the University of the West of England and chair of the Development Management Network, then gave a presentation:

The Development Management Network aims to help bring about the transition from development control to development management and engage members in this process. It is about changing mindsets to embed and link the management of development into the new spatial planning approach. There is evidence, such as that provided by the 'Effective Practice in Spatial Planning' project to suggest that the pace of change is slow in many local planning authorities.

The network currently has 162 members and is in a good position to grow due to its potential membership, drawn from the planners who are engaged in the activity of decision making in planning, many of whom have the expertise to manage development.

A steering group of experts helps to develop the network and they are drawn from all walks of planning including central government, ATLAS, local government: urban and suburban, north and south, legal profession, private practice and academia.

The steering group is involved in linking the network with other groups, chairing and speak at conferences and providing media representation through the RTPI 'media ambassadors' initiative. The steering group works with the network manager, Rhian Brimble, to disseminate information through Planning magazine and regular e-mail bulletins. The wider network membership is invited to the quarterly steering group meetings to participate in the group's discussions.

The network contributes to Government consultations through the RTPI policy team and has recently been involved in the following consultations.

- Planning White Paper
- Micro-generation consultation
- Fee regimes
- Householder Development Consents Review (HDCR)

In particular the network has been heavily involved in the HDCR for nearly three years and members of the steering group feel as though they have made a significant difference to the outcome, and influenced the published proposals.

The steering group will continue to work closely with the RTPI policy team in responding to consultations. The network is interested in the following topics and proposed changes in these areas.

- Appeal procedures
- Basements
- Retail
- Local Member Review Boards

Over the next year we will see a significant change in the way development is managed, particularly the way in which major applications are dealt with, with the introduction of 'planning performance agreements', and more pro-active changes as a result of the relationship between development management and the new development plans. This does not mean that the regulatory functions of micro-management of the local environment are unimportant, but there is a wider message about the new planning system. There is evidence that many planning authorities are not integrating their functions as well as they should be and consequently there is an important role for the network in helping to change the culture. We need to better understand what development management means and how it affects decision making. Throughout this period of change the network will hold debates about innovative methods, partnership working, proactive working, and community involvement in the whole process of development.

Janet Askew expressed some disappointment about the low membership figures from such a potentially large base, but she was optimistic that the RTPI was doing the right thing by setting up networks to involve the membership much more in Institute business. The steering group is committed to training and re-education and it has reviewed all training and education in relation to development management. The network is drawing this together and will be publishing a regular themed newsletter on the subject.

The chairs of both networks then took questions.

Mike Ash asked if the required culture shift that had been intended with the 2004 Act was near completion. Both John and Janet felt that there was still a way to go, but they remained optimistic. Heather Cheesbrough felt that it was the role of the Institute to be delivering a vision, rather than merely being regulatory. John felt that the test of good spatial planning was the question "is this place more what we want it to be than it was previously?"

In response to a question from Ron Tate, Janet said that lack of time in development control to carry out any kind of change

continued apace. Planners bemoaned that meeting targets resulted in no time to pursue the quality agenda, but hopefully this unhealthy culture was gradually being phased out. Jim Claydon commented that it was a job of the Institute to challenge such a culture.

Colin Haylock expressed the view that 150 members of the Development Management Network was a good base. He felt it was excellent that both networks existed, and that they work together – such activity needed to be celebrated more.

In answer to a question from Owain Wyn on community engagement, John noted that his network was endeavouring to engage communities through visits around the country. Janet made the point that community involvement should not be separated out from the rest of the process. As the Network was relatively new, it had not yet looked at the questions that arise from devolution in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Debbie Sorkin reported that she and Trish Cookson, Networks & Associations Developer, were speaking to the enforcement group in Northern Ireland, which had shown great interest in NAPE – the National Association for Planning Enforcement. By extension, there was a role for the regions and nations in promoting the work of the networks.

Jim Claydon concluded this session by thanking Mike Roberts, John Baker and Janet Askew for their contributions.

General Assembly business

Jim Claydon opened proceedings by reporting that Chris Berry was the sole General Assembly regional representative who had put his name forward to be the regional representative on Executive Board. He was thus duly elected, for a two year period.

Janet O'Neill invited questions on the contents of the RTPI Update for January 2008.

In response to Ron Tate's request that the Overseas Planners' Reception should be built on in the future, Debbie Sorkin reported that the initiative was going from strength to strength – for example, Saturday courses were now being proposed for planners from overseas. This work overlapped with that of the International Development Network. It should be noted that increasing numbers of overseas planners are working in the private, rather than the public, sector.

Hazel McKay requested that, although the Education for Sustainable Development Network had failed, a Sustainable

Development Network was needed, not least to work towards the aim of achieving a 20% carbon reduction in the UK. Debbie Sorkin noted that, as with previous activities, the subject could be addressed using a number of current networks working together with, for example, the Construction Industry Council. She also reported that there were a number of potential networks “waiting in the wings” – for example a Small Islands Network and a Planning Administrators Network.

Alistair Stark noted that the RTPi in Scotland had been through a difficult year. He thanked Robert Upton and all staff, in particular Debbie Sorkin, for their help in achieving a much improved working relationship between Scotland and London.

Janet O’Neill then gave a verbal report on decisions taken at the last Executive Board meeting. She mentioned:

- A session was held on a strategic review of Institute activities – the outcome is that Robert Upton will write a paper for the Board, with the outcomes of Board deliberations to be reported to General Assembly.
- Representatives of Summer School were invited to attend for a detailed discussion on ways in which the Schools could collaborate more with the Institute. A memorandum of understanding will now be written, to achieve more regular contact.
- Directors are now giving regular reports to the Board on key indicators of Institute activity.
- The Board will have an Away Day in York in April.
- Working Parties are currently reviewing the ‘New Vision’ initiative and Governance issues for the Institute.
- Topics for future General Assemblies will be Education in April and Transport in July. The October topic is yet to be decided – all GA members are encouraged to suggest what could be debated.

Glyn Roberts asked whether any work was done on the reasons why members choose to resign from the Institute – he felt that many planners consider the Institute to be primarily concerned with the statutory system only, which was not, he believed, the purpose of the New Vision process a few years ago. Sue Percy, Director, Membership, Education & Lifelong Learning, reported that such information was sometimes difficult to acquire, but a number of reasons were given: for example, that they were moving out of the planning field, that planning was no longer relevant to their job, or that they did not feel they got much from their membership. Analysis is taking place, and the results will be fed back to General Assembly members.

In response to a question from Heather Cheesbrough on overseas planners gaining accreditation with the UK Institute, Sue Percy noted that the RTPI does have reciprocal arrangements with some foreign institutes – candidates can take a distance learning module from Leeds Metropolitan University. Associate membership is available for those unable to achieve corporate membership in this way. The whole system is being re-examined this year.

Martin Willey then gave a verbal update based on the paper sent to General Assembly members on the Member Structures Task Group. He noted that this was important work, which would have structural consequences and could not therefore be completed overnight. The initial conclusions were that:

- (1) there was an issue concerning committee structures;
- (2) communications between the Executive Board and General Assembly needed to be improved;
- (3) at present the full potential of GA members was not being realised.

Martin noted that only 38 of 58 GA members voted in the election for Executive Board members – this was an improvement on the previous year, when only 27 voted, but it showed that engagement between the Board and GA should be reciprocal. James Taylor had already sent out e-mails requesting 2008 committee preferences and future meeting topics; in addition, GA members who were interested in leadership training should contact James.

David Marshall welcomed feedback from Executive Board meetings – he hoped that this signalled an end to a culture of secrecy. David also noted that he, as the sole member of Audit Committee still in post, was feeling rather lonely – he asked for GA members to consider whether they might wish to put their names forward to join the Audit Committee.

Ken Burley noted that he felt there had been a considerable move forward in the relationship between the Board and GA today.

Ron Tate welcomed the positive words given today on the subject of leadership; he hoped that previous training in other capacities would not preclude members from taking part.

In response to a question on the role of Networks within the Institute, Robert Upton noted that the presentations by Networks today were the first in a series of such briefings.

In response to a question from Hazel McKay, Martin Willey said that the roles of trustees would be communicated to GA members in due course.

Jim Claydon proposed to the General Assembly the Executive Board's recommendation that Vincent Goodstadt and Peter Wilbraham be reappointed as Honorary Treasurer and Honorary Solicitor and Secretary respectively for 2008.

The motion was carried.

In response to a question from Colin Haylock, Robert Upton reported that he had written to a number of Institute members who had recently been granted honours by the Queen – a report on who these were could be distributed to GA members.

Jim Claydon then gave his final presentation as President of the RTPI, reviewing his year in office.

On receiving the chain of office, Janet O'Neill gave a speech as the new President of the Institute, outlining her vision for the year.

The business of the General Assembly concluded with the outgoing Presidential Reception.