

RTPI NEWS

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Strategy sets quality expectations in sustainable place-making vision

In responding to the recession local authority planners are on the front line in taking forward government ambitions for well-designed developments that enhance local environments, maintains *Andrew Matheson*

The passion with which communities secretary Hazel Blears presses good design and local distinctiveness is reinforced in the recently published *World-Class Places*, the government's strategy for improving the quality of place.

In the foreword, she and secretary of state for culture, media and sport Andy Burnham note: "It can be tempting during these difficult economic times to put the built environment in a box marked 'pending'. That would be a mistake."

At the front line of the planning decision-making process, councils have the carrot of the local development framework and the stick of application refusals to secure good design. At some authorities there is also an elected member design champion to benefit proper scrutiny.

However, the impact of the recession has seen fewer development proposals and more developers necessarily paring costs to the bone. Conditions are unlikely to boost the forces of urban renaissance that we have been witnessing until recently – but does it need to have a negative impact on local design and quality?

Arguably, less pressure from new schemes means that more officer and councillor hours are available to get design and quality frameworks worked up, consulted on and published. Many have been lagging for want of that scarce resource – time.

This has, perhaps, struck a particular chord in Wales, where minister for finance and public service delivery Andrew Davies told the Welsh Society of Local Authority Chief Executives conference: "The worst response to the recession would be for public services to stumble into a series of arbitrary cuts and process of attrition that lose sight of outcomes for citizens." The RTPI has also argued forcefully



Development: early local consultation at heart of urban renaissance



The carrot of the local development framework and the stick of application refusals can be used to press good design

that the retention and redeployment of planners, and councillors can press the benefits of such initiative.

The *World-Class Places* strategy provides the opportunity for CABE, the government's architecture, urban design and public space watchdog, to advise on or review every significant public sector project. So there is no lack of expert advice and support for those projects capable of making the most impact.

In a similar vein, a recent review of Architecture + Design Scotland commented that its record to date has shown that proactive support for improving development outcomes can produce real benefits. In particular, the review emphasised that the philosophy should be helpful and enabling rather than judgemental. This fits with the approach to the planning reform agenda across the UK, which places emphasis on early consultation.

Cynics might assert that little of this approach will wash with developers, who are still committed to pressing ahead with projects that are timed to open just as the recession lifts but for whom the paucity of loan finance means that the frill must be cut. In their eyes, quality design may equate to frippery.

While an increasing number of developers are calling for renegotiation of planning agreements, bargaining on the sound principle of "give a little, take a little" may be good reason to be more flexible on some conditions than others. One of those that should be protected is design quality.

Well-designed buildings also offer the potential of substantial money-saving in the medium to long term through energy efficiency. This is in addition to a public-spirited contribution to the mitigation of climate change, for which there are a growing number of potential partnerships or awards.

As *World-Class Places* notes: "The urgent obligation to create more sustainable places is also a great opportunity to improve the quality of these places for everyone." In the current climate rather more forethought may be required, but councils backing quality will make an important contribution to delivering for the upturn.

Andrew Matheson is network manager of the RTPI's Politicians in Planning Network (PIPA). The theme of this article will be debated at the Planning Convention on 19 June, led by Crawley Borough Council member Claire Denman and Westminster City Council's Alastair Moss. For more information or to join the network, please visit www.rtpi.org.uk/politicians_in_planning_network or email pipa@rtpi.org.uk

Journal compares drivers of change

Fresh perspectives on evaluating planning outcomes around the world offer lessons for practitioners, argues Jenny Crawford

Planning Theory and Practice senior editor and University of Sheffield professor Heather Campbell succinctly describes the journal's mission as enabling both researchers and practitioners to "distinguish the significant from the unimportant" in understanding what drives and influences change.

In aiming to provide an international focus and forum for the development of theory and practice in spatial planning, the most recent edition published in March casts a spotlight on urban growth, plan evaluation and participation.

Dalhousie University school of planning professor Jill Grant describes the Canadian experience of implementing planning policy around new urbanism and smart growth principles in the suburbs of its large metropolitan areas. There is a worrying divide of policy rhetoric and theory from urban practice, she claims. The latter remains focused on car-dependent development at densities below those intended by planning policy, while private exclusive communities are becoming increasingly common. As one planner comments, "you do a plan and then you hit reality".

The institutional, political, economic and socio-cultural barriers to good places may vary but the planner's ability to respond requires comparable evaluation tools and there are real opportunities to learn from others, Grant says. The focus for change may be in forming interdisciplinary teams in local authorities or working creatively with market demands and consumer preferences. Political relationships and support for enhanced regulation could also be explored.

The relationship between planning and its outcomes is explored by the University of Oporto's Vitor Oliveira and Paulo Pinho in the context of Lisbon and Oporto in Portugal. They describe their approach in evaluating planning and implementation systems in the two cities. Their conclusions highlight a need for closer integration between



Crawford: international spotlight

transportation authorities and development planners, co-ordination between adjacent authorities and improved relationships between planners and politicians.

The capacity of civic society to influence planning processes is explored in articles from Tanja Winkler of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Amin Kamete of the Nordic Africa Institute and Sandra Pinel of the University of Idaho.

Pinel's description of the outcome of decentralisation and co-management policies on the fragile landscape of the Philippines' Mount Pulag national park is particularly arresting. It is a story of strategic competition between stakeholders, leading to the construction of two almost parallel roads counter to shared environmental objectives. The paper concludes that state or regional governance institutions must maintain a critical role in ensuring co-operation in the face of decentralised decision-making.

Professional reflection is urged by Kamete in relation to urban planning policy in Zimbabwe. He argues that meaningful and useful participation is relevant to the highly charged political environment. "For governance not to degenerate into a dysfunctional charade, a deep cultural change is necessary on the part of technical experts," he concludes.

Jenny Crawford is RTPI head of research. *Planning Theory and Practice* is published by Routledge's Taylor and Francis Group in conjunction with the RTPI. For details of discounted subscriptions for RTPI members, please visit www.rtpi.org.uk/member_services/planning_theory_and_practice

Research Bulletin

RTPI directive response backs spatial data share drive

The infrastructure for spatial information in Europe (INSPIRE) directive aims to improve the sharing of spatial information by public authorities at local, regional, national and European levels and to make such data more widely and consistently available to the public. In its response to DEFRA's consultation on implementing the directive in the UK, the RTPI highlights its support for the DCLG's *Place Matters — The Location Strategy for the UK* published last November. It stresses the need for the entire spatial planning community to be represented in the intended user community sub-group. The data identified in the directive are central to spatial planning and cover mapping, transport networks and protected sites, land use, infrastructure, demography, risk zones and mineral resources. As the location strategy notes, the current situation imposes costs and inefficiencies on public sector bodies because of data collection duplication and difficulties in sharing information. This hampers the integration of accurate place-based information to guide policy development and the fair distribution of resources. The RTPI strongly backs its conclusion that UK spatial data need considerably more support.

To read the response in full, please visit www.rtpi.org.uk/item/2253

Papers invited for journal's sustainability special issue

The *International Journal of Sustainable Society* will be publishing a special issue on the theme of planning and sustainability, inspired by papers presented at the UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference at Newcastle University in April. The central aim is to examine how sustainability ideas are shaping planning practices and theories in the UK, Ireland and beyond. Papers are invited on planning and climate change, sustainability appraisal, design and urban form, governance for sustainability and sustainable lifestyles. Contributions from doctoral students and early career researchers are encouraged. The two-stage selection process starts with the submission of a 300-word abstract by 15 June, followed by manuscripts.

For more details, please visit www.rtpi.org.uk/download/6231/Microsoft-Word-ijss_callforpapers.pdf

Survey skills programme offers opportunities for researchers

The Survey Skills programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council is an opportunity for social researchers to gain an insight into the survey process and improve their skills. The scheme is open to postgraduate students, academics and researchers from government and other public bodies and those working in the charity and voluntary sectors. Workshops will be held across the UK throughout the year and participants have the opportunity to attend up to four placement days visiting survey and research organisations. For more details, please visit www.surveynet.ac.uk/ssp/introduction.asp or email info@surveynet.ac.uk

Book provides comparisons of European rural research

The new publication *Comparing Rural Development* looks at continuity and change in the countryside of western Europe. The book is edited by Jo Vergunst and Arnar Arnason of the University of Aberdeen and Mark Shucksmith of Newcastle University.

For more details, please visit www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=10651&edition_id=11657



Spatial planning: improved data sharing can cut cost and delay

Assembly sets outlines for climate change action plan

Planning's task is to set sustainable development in its wider environmental context, says *Michael Napier*

Climate change is now the overarching priority for the world, forcing the rules of sustainable development to change. One strong view to emerge from the general assembly in April was that decision-makers can no longer be satisfied with merely balancing social, economic and environmental factors.

But this view was also strongly opposed. The counter-argument is that an approach to development that tackles climate change without looking at wider environmental issues and the equally pressing challenge of poverty and inequality is itself unsustainable. One speaker even claimed that an over-emphasis on climate change has produced flawed proposals and bad decisions.

Through a series of break-out groups the assembly sought to come up with proposals for an action policy paper to be launched at the Planning Convention later this month. Given the complexity, initial proposals were perhaps inevitably broad-brush, expressed in language that required reworking to be intelligible to a wider audience.

This outcome disappointed some assembly members, who wanted to see a clear programme of feasible action for the RTPPI beginning now. However, others were encouraged by an attempt to deal with issues so difficult that it may seem easier to take refuge in denial, fine words or pious platitudes than look for practical solutions. One group leader pointed out that behind the broader headline proposals lay a programme aimed at longer-term objectives.

Both climate change and poverty were identified as global issues. The developed world is not immune to



Assembly: formulating proposals

the consequences of rising levels of urban poverty in developing countries. If climate change increases the scale of deprivation, this will mesh the issues closer together.

A major problem is that in many of the most vulnerable areas of the world, planning as understood in the UK does not exist. The case for good planning has to be made to governments at an international level and the RTPPI has an interest as well as a public duty to lend its support to this effort.

One key question is what the profession has to offer. Everyone agreed that climate change needs an interdisciplinary approach but even this was regarded as too narrow. The issue needs to encompass all the institutions of society, backed by strong public support. But the RTPPI must identify where it stands and what contribution its members are to make. Perhaps it has some catching up to do.

Michael Napier is a former RTPPI member services director.

RTPI Bulletin Board

Workshop set to frame counter-terrorism measures response

The RTPPI's urban design network is seeking its members' views and comments on two consultation documents. The first, *Working Together to Protect Crowded Places*, is designed to encourage better working relationships between local authorities, agencies, organisations and businesses on counter-terrorism issues. The second, *Safer Places*, is a practical Home Office-DCLG guide on designing measures into developments. Comments will be taken into account at a workshop to be held at the RTPPI's London headquarters on 11 June to formulate the institute's response.

To submit comments or to attend the workshop, please email urban.design@rtpi.org.uk with the title of the consultation in the subject box by 10 June.

Network canvasses for evidence on shared street experiences

The RTPPI's transport planning network is seeking the help of members for its comments on shared surfaces for pedestrians, cyclists and motor vehicles. CABA has argued that streets which are designed to give all users more freedom of movement are ultimately slower, safer and more social places where people of all ages can walk, cycle, play, talk and shop more easily. This contentious concept advocates removing signs and guard rails and obliging drivers and pedestrians to become more alert to each other, which in turn leads to more responsible driving. However, there is still work to do to get such shared spaces right for everyone. Such spaces remove all physical distinctions, such as kerbs or different materials. Guide dogs are trained to stop at kerbs, so removing them can cause confusion. Eye contact between pedestrians and motorists is key, but this is of little use to the visually impaired.

To comment, please email transport@rtpi.org.uk by 16 June with the topic title in the subject line.

Member seeks help on Devon highway management protocol

Transport planning network member Paul Tiplady is working on a project to produce a single protocol and good practice document for the management of the highway network in Devon's ten protected landscapes. He would like to find examples of this type of work so the county can build on best practice. Specifically, he would like a pdf version of any publication on projects of this type or information on other manuals or protocols.

To respond, please email enquiries@craggatak.co.uk

Road safety consultation set to shape government strategy

Transport planning network members are invited to respond to the DfT's *Safer Way* consultation on making the UK's roads the safest in the world. The document seeks views on the vision, targets and measures for improving road safety beyond 2010. The views received will influence the final shape of the DfT's next road safety strategy, due to be published at the end of the year. A summary response will be included in a forthcoming network bulletin.

To comment, please email transport@rtpi.org.uk with the title of the consultation in the subject line by 16 June.

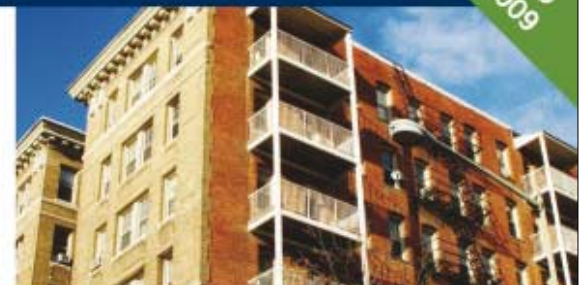


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Chair: Chris Martin, Executive Director, Yorkshire and Humber Assembly



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