

Wales Planning Conference, June 2009, Cardiff Breakout Seminar – Developing the LDP Evidence Base

*Karen Potter, University of Liverpool
karen.potter@liverpool.ac.uk*

Simon Coop (Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners, Cardiff) and Nicola Gulley (Spatial Development Manager at Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council) co hosted an interesting and stimulating session. Being held in the spacious Assembly Room perhaps reflected the popularity in delegates' choice of this break out seminar on developing the LDP Evidence Base.



Simon Coop, Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners. Cardiff

Opening with a quote from Bill Clinton, “we should govern on the basis of evidence”, Simon’s presentation outlined how an evidence base should be established, what topics should be covered and how the evidence should be translated into policy. Directing delegates to the 2004 PCP Act Section 61, “which says a lot about what we have to do”, Simon stressed the need that Local Development Plans should be rooted in an evidence base that is sound and credible. Although some issues are generic, for example shopping and housing, Simon emphasised that a one size fits all approach will fail as many issues are

area specific. The sheer volume of evidence is not key; the key is to plan the evidence base well and be informed by it intelligently to make planning policy. Although recognising that methodology will vary according to the issues, general points were outlined including a baseline assessment; review of past trends; anticipated future trends; key drivers of change and from there the policy implications. Data needs to be relevant and up to date, forecasts need to be tested and survey sample sizes should be large enough for robustness. Simon also added that quantitative inputs should be balanced with softer qualitative inputs – “talk to people, who, when and how to consult will vary according to the issues but it is a powerful means of getting evidence allowing a richer and fuller understanding of the policy context”. Looking in detail at the LDP strengths and weaknesses, he believed that the key strengths tend to be those studies with a longer legacy such as housing needs assessments and retail capacity studies. The weaknesses are those studies that are not formal requirements or are more recent requirements such as strategic housing requirements, affordable housing viability and open space assessments. Simon’s tip to delegates was to learn from the good and bad points from the studies and look elsewhere to what is happening, including England where the requirements are greater. The reality is that developing the evidence base will involve a lot of detailed work over a fairly lengthy period of time. The investment that is made at this stage of the process will yield dividends in the preparation of the LDP, providing a basis for the necessary policy choices and trade

offs and more importantly, when the plan is being implemented and used to shape planning decisions on a daily basis. Simon concluded with the critical point that evidence is not policy; evidence informs policy - "you can't hide behind it, plan making should draw heavily on evidence, but then you must move beyond it.....it's what you do with it that counts".



Nicola Gulley, Spatial Development Manager at Rhondda Cynon Taf Borough Council and seminar attendees in the Assembly Room, Cardiff City Hall

Nicola followed with an engaging presentation from the planning practitioner's perspective, Rhondda Cynon Taf Borough being one of the first councils to develop a preferred strategy. Nicola outlined the scope of the evidence gathering task. The borough is the second largest in Wales with a population of 230 000 and significantly varying socio economic conditions, the northern area experiencing depopulation and deprivation and the southern area; affluent with population pressure. Nicola emphasised producing the plan in 4 years was very challenging, "it is essential to understand where you are, what resources you require and how to time it". The Development Planning Team at Rhondda Cynon Taf identified what could be done in house, the evidence that could be developed in collaboration and obtained specialist help where it was considered there was not the sufficient expertise to deliver. For the Deposit Draft LDP in Feb/March 2009, 15 topic papers were produced in house. Housing apportionment, habitat regulations assessment, landscape assessment, nature conservation and renewable energy were a collaborative venture. Specialist advice was commissioned for the employment land assessment, retail study, commercial leisure, strategic transportation assessment and the SA/SEA. Nicola explained that the team found it "tricky to future proof", considering the number of policy changes in Wales. Nicola concluded with three key points for the delegates: "be clear about the evidence that is required; be realistic about resources and be resigned to the fact that the evidence base is never complete".

In common with the wider conference agenda, the ensuing open discussion centred on the difficulties faced in the current economic climate. One delegate was interested to know how others were coping with viability as the housing market had "fallen off a cliff". Advice was offered that as renegotiations are entered into, the development process needs to be rethought across the board – the true cost and who pays, as land values have changed and it is a new market, "this does not concern viability, but profitability". The discussion continued that it has to be a commercial imperative to produce sustainable homes and planners must not revisit the mistakes of the last 40 years in permitting low quality development.