

Planning Conference Wales, June 2009: Delivering the Welsh Planning System

Synopsis of the Design Commission for Wales - Design Review Process and Purpose

Cindy Harris, Design Commission for Wales

The Design Commission for Wales is becoming an instrumental part of the planning process within Wales, Cindy Harris's workshop explained why.

Design Commission for Wales, Who we are

The Design Commission for Wales (DCFW) was established in 2002 by the Welsh Assembly Government with the aim to improve standards of design in Wales. DCFW is one of four design commissions throughout the UK, the Welsh team is relatively small in comparison to its sister organisations but is incredibly active none the less. The team comprises a combination of full time staff and volunteers who contribute to the running and development of the Commission and the design review service.

The Welsh Assembly Government have set the mission for the team, this is:

To champion high standards of architecture, landscape and urban design in Wales, promoting wider understanding of the importance of good quality in the built environment, supporting skill building, encouraging social inclusion and sustainable development

Underpinning their Mission are four strategic objectives, these are:

- To champion high standards of design and architecture to the public and private sector in Wales by promoting wider understanding of design issues and the importance of good standards in enhancing the built environment across all sectors.
- To promote design practice that is compatible with the National Assembly Sustainable Development Scheme, promoting best practice in energy efficiency, waste disposal and public transport.
- To promote design practice compatible with the highest standards in relation to equal opportunity and promoting social inclusion.
- Give due regard to promoting excellence in day to day developments, such as housing estates and industrial units, as well as promoting excellence in prestige projects.

Similar to that of their sister commission CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) DCFW have published a substantial collection of publications that support their mission and objectives by providing design guidance and reviews.

Design Review Service

The Design Review Service is an important facility provided nationally to Local Planning Authorities and other public organisations. The service provides an independent evaluation of a scheme at one particular point during a developments design lifecycle, it is mainly the Welsh Local Authorities who use this tool as part of the consultation process during the planning application process, but the review service can be used at many stages throughout the process, Cindy Harris explained the earlier the panel can review the design of the project the more helpful because subsequent reviews can be undertaken further into the design process, continued assessment and consultation allow the panel to provide increasingly consistent and in-depth comments and guidance. In principle the panel will review a wide range of developments from an extension to a cottage in Pembrokeshire to the proposed MOD development in St Athan, different developments will suit different methods of review, St Athan for example was undertaken on a piecemeal basis.

The DCFW provides expert and independent professional advice; that aims to facilitate a common aim - good quality design within the built environment. The review panel consists of a number of wide ranging professionals such as Planners, Architects, Urban Designers, Engineers and Project Managers that can provide a breadth of expertise that may not be available to the project team. The review of the project consists of a design review with a select panel which is then followed up with a subsequent unbiased report that can be utilised throughout the development process by a number of contributing bodies such as the Local Planning Authority.

Cindy Harris advised that during the design review process a number of reoccurring issues have become apparent and highlighted that it is important for the design of any project to take into account the following issues:

- site analysis consisting of contextual information can assist the design process,
- sustainability,
- public realm and place making; and
- re-thinking highway practices.

Cindy Harris explained that some projects that had been reviewed did not provide basic information and had not considered fully significant design elements such as site context, sustainable design and the public realm.

Design and Access Statements

In light of the legislative changes and the updated Technical Advice Note (TAN) 12: Design (June 2009) Design and Access Statements have become a mandatory part of most planning applications (applications for the approval of reserved matters not included). Cindy Harris advised that a Design and Access Statement is an important document that if implemented correctly can be utilised throughout the development process, Cindy explained that Design and Access Statements should not be generic documents but should tell the specific story of the design process and how the designer arrived at the final design. Design and Access Statements should also be living documents that are able to incorporate amendments to the design and suggestions from advisory bodies, such as DCFW. Due to the new TAN 12: Design, the fast approaching Code for Sustainable Homes and Breeam sustainability requirements which are due to come in to force on 1 September 2009 and the not yet adopted TAN 22: Planning for Sustainable Buildings it has become increasingly important to consider sustainability within the design of any development and therefore to demonstrate how sustainability targets will be reached within the story of a development.

Discussion

During the final 10 minutes of the workshop Cindy Harris invited delegates to ask questions; the following questions were asked:

Was there a strong relationship between DCFW and Planning Aid Wales? Cindy advised that there was not much contact between the two organisations but it would be a worthwhile relationship to develop.

How often do DCFW and the Planning Inspectorate agree on certain projects? The delegate explained that this figure would be useful to know as a tool of encouraging council members to give weight to DCFW reviews. Cindy answered that the DCFW had appeared at one appeal and agreed that close links with the Planning Inspectorate is important and follow up on the result of planning applications the DCFW has reviewed would be a useful tool.

Considering that good design is a fundamental part of the development process is it an aspiration of DCFW to become a statutory consultant like in other areas of Europe who have qualified architects as part of their planning process? Cindy explained that becoming a statutory body was not an aspiration of the DCFW as they benefitted from being independent and therefore their views are unbiased, however CABE did lead more of a statutory role as they are heavily involved in the development of the Olympic facilities and the development of schools within in England.

Should Planning and Building Control be merged within the Local Authorities so that the work that has been done during the planning process can truly continue as the development moves to on site works? The delegate explained that this was being explored within Bridgend County Council in terms of Breeam Assessors becoming involved during the planning process. Cindy agreed that the two disciplines should be merged as they complemented one another and advised that it was something that local authorities should explore.

Caitlin Foster