

# RTPI NEWS

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## Council service customer focus cuts application decision time and waste

A review of development control processes prompted one south Wales authority to swap a target-driven approach for a more efficient approvals system and motivated staff, *Geoff White* and *Nicola Pearce* explain

Let's impose a condition, because we don't have all the details. Shall we suggest that the application be withdrawn to allow more time to get the scheme right? Sound familiar? These practices are driven by the eight-week target. Are they what the applicant really wants? Doubtful. Is this a good use of resources? Most definitely not.

By asking such questions, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council's development control service has been transformed in the past 12 months. Our starting point was not a failing service but a wish to improve. We were already turning applications around efficiently — or so we thought.

We carried out a systems thinking review. This approach differs from the command and control rules that operate in most organisations. It required a fundamental analysis of the way that we operate, starting with our customers and defining the real purpose of development control from their perspective — to approve quality development quickly.

We mapped out our system from applicants' initial approach to putting a spade in the ground. We looked at all forms of communication we use — post, telephone, email and face to face — and asked applicants, agents, objectors and consultees what matters to them.

What we found was surprising. Our systems were fragmented and repetitious, with unintended consequences. The 115 steps on the simplest application meant that there was no ownership, which led to wasteful mistakes. It also meant that we were looking for amendments after registration, having already written to neighbours. This triggered further letters and caused confusion, resulting in phone calls and yet more wasted time.



**Neath Port Talbot: all application aspects discussed at daily meetings**



By case officers giving good advice early we are more likely to get a clean application when it is submitted

So we set about redesigning our systems. Our focus was on our purpose, with the aim of eliminating waste and delivering a service that meets customers' needs rather than targets. Our front-line staff are doing the work.

We are now organised into three teams, each dealing with all applications, appeals and enforcement matters in their particular area. Each team meets daily, with highway officers also attending, to consider new applications, complaints and pre-application enquiries. The team examines each application in detail for validity and any shortcomings in the design or submitted details.

A case officer is then appointed and arrangements made to meet the applicant on-site, when issues such as missing signatures or edge red boundaries are sorted out. The aim is a clean application of satisfactory design and providing all the information to allow a decision without pre-commencement conditions.

Only then is it registered — always using the correct valid date — and consultations sent, eliminating repeat letters to neighbours and consultees. Having elements such as screen fencing annotated on drawings, which might otherwise be dealt with by condition, can prevent neighbours' concerns.

Pre-application enquiries are dealt with in the same way. By giving good advice early we are more likely to get a clean application when it is submitted. In overall terms, this is more efficient and reduces waste.

The outcomes are that our staff are now better motivated and have full ownership of the process. Daily team meetings are a powerful learning environment. Everyone is involved in all applications, which is particularly good in developing the less experienced staff.

Meanwhile, customers appreciate the consistent advice and face-to-face contact with case officers. We are chasing them rather than the other way around. As a result, pre-commencement conditions have dropped from 17 per cent to less than one per cent across all full and reserved matters applications.

Improved efficiency has allowed us to reduce staff numbers by 15 per cent through natural wastage while enhancing our service. With our focus now on the system we are able to identify variations in our performance and make further improvements. The average end-to-end time in dealing with applications has been reduced from 86 to 52 days. And for those who still look at targets, our date from valid submission to decision time now averages 38 days.

*Geoff White is head of planning and Nicola Pearce is development control manager at Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council.*

# Exploring climate change strategy

Spatial planners' crucial contribution to forming a place-sensitive response to climate change is described in a new book, writes *Jenny Crawford*

An understanding of climate change is altering both the framework and the substance of development planning. The profound professional, technical, theoretical and ethical issues for planners it raises are explored in a forthcoming book *Planning for Climate Change — Strategies for Mitigation and Adaptation*.

The book demonstrates the complexity involved in grappling with low-carbon, climate-proof urban form and infrastructure. The contributors show that politics, values, governance, legislation and institutional capacity are inescapable considerations for planning practice. Indeed, spatial planning is a key determinant of governance capacity to respond effectively to climate change and related sustainable development challenges.

In his chapter, the University of Texas at Arlington's Jeff Howard stresses the lack of attention paid by practitioners and researchers to tensions between mitigation and adaptation and their potential reciprocal interrelation. He discusses the conceptual and practical relationship between policies to cut carbon emissions and those that enable adaptation to the impacts of climate change, such as more extreme temperatures and flooding.

His conclusions challenge all those with responsibility for shaping development. Mitigation must be the primary form of adaptation, he stresses. "Without this resolve, a focus on adaptation threatens to degenerate into an open-ended commitment to adapt to escalating climate change while failing to do enough to arrest it," he insists.

However, other contributors emphasise the spatial inequities generated by climate impacts and potentially by climate change policies. These operate not only at the global scale but also at the national, regional and local levels. This is a governance matter that planners are best placed to mediate.

It involves not only the development of evidence bases such as the integrated urban models described



**Flooding: climate change impacts**

by Jim Hall of Newcastle University's school of civil engineering and geosciences but also a commitment to involvement, as argued strenuously by both Harriet Bulkeley of Durham University's department of geography and Claire Haggett from the University of Edinburgh's school of geosciences.

Our role as planners is to bring the evidence about urban functions and interventions into political decision-making and to make clear recommendations about environmental and economic sustainability and social equity.

The book highlights the significance of the place-based approach to climate policy. As Rafael Pizarro of the University of Sydney's faculty of architecture, design and planning emphasises, different climatic circumstances have different mitigation and adaptation potentials.

On the other hand, as the University of Oxford transport studies unit's David Banister and Robert Gordon University centre for transport policy's Jillian Anable point out in their chapter on transport, there are huge variations in the distribution of per capita emissions.

Car and air travel are the dominant factors. The top ten per cent of emitters in the UK are responsible for 43 per cent of emissions and the bottom ten per cent for only one per cent. As they conclude, planners are only part of the multifaceted approach that is urgently needed.

*Jenny Crawford is RTPI head of research. She is editor with Simin Davoudi and Abid Mehmood of **Planning for Climate Change — Strategies for Mitigation and Adaptation**. For more information, please visit [www.earthscan.co.uk/?tabid=74708](http://www.earthscan.co.uk/?tabid=74708)*

## Research Bulletin

### Climate change report looks at role of innovation

A recent report commissioned by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts from the University of East Anglia's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, Norwich Business School and CRed community carbon reduction project assesses the role that innovation is playing in meeting the climate change challenge and also identifies where this needs to be harnessed more fully. It covers two broad areas — transport, from changes to vehicles and fuels to infrastructure and planning, and energy and energy efficiency, from generation, including renewable and microgeneration, to energy efficiency and demand.

For more information, please visit [www.biggreenchallenge.org.uk/publications](http://www.biggreenchallenge.org.uk/publications). Related scientific reviews on energy and innovation in the built environment are available in last year's *Foresight Review on Sustainable Energy Management in the Built Environment* at [www.foresight.gov.uk/OurWork/ActiveProjects/SustainableEnergy/sembeoutputs.asp](http://www.foresight.gov.uk/OurWork/ActiveProjects/SustainableEnergy/sembeoutputs.asp)

### Bidders invited for European development research funding

A new round of calls for research projects will be launched by the co-ordinators of the EU research programme on territorial development on 16 September at an information day in Brussels. About £1.2 million will be made available across a wide range of regional development themes, including the attractiveness of areas for investment and tourism, accessibility, land-use patterns and public services. Invitations are also being made for public bodies to identify further targeted research to support their regional policy-making and benchmark their areas' development within the EU context.

To register, please visit [www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu) by 10 September. To join the UK network of researchers and policy-makers interested in understanding spatial drivers, please visit [www.espon.org.uk](http://www.espon.org.uk)

### Research foundation sets up housing market task force

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has set up a task force to develop a series of long-term policy options that could help end the cycle of boom and bust in the housing market. It will look at fundamental questions surrounding the dominant housing market model. The task force includes JRF chief executive Julia Unwin, Kate Barker and consultant Peter Williams. It will deliver its recommendations next year.

For more information, please visit [www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/housing-market-task-force](http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/housing-market-task-force)

## Event

### Health, Housing, Jobs and Well-Being Conference

27 November. Regional Studies Association. London.

This conference will explore the spatial issues for health and its relationships with housing and socio-economic factors. The association promotes the study and dissemination of research into the economic, physical and sociological problems of development in major areas and encourages participation by academics and policy-makers.

For more information, please visit [www.regional-studies-assoc.ac.uk/events/future.asp](http://www.regional-studies-assoc.ac.uk/events/future.asp)



**Energy efficiency: areas identified for climate change innovation**

# Conservation comes alive in Planning Aid school project

A classroom initiative in north Tyneside aims to instil a sense of community heritage, reports *Kevin Lillie*

As debates continue over future legislation relating to heritage, Planning Aid North (PAN) is helping young people in northern England appreciate the importance of preserving our buildings and landscapes.

These studies have now been brought to life through an initiative in North Tyneside. Shiremoor Primary School has adopted planning as a regular area of study and a new topic on conservation and heritage was recently introduced.

As part of classroom studies, pupils were given a wide range of images of local features such as the church, bus stops, schools and shops. They were asked to discuss what all these elements contribute to the area, then report back on which should be protected for the future and which could be demolished.

The second stage was to design a small settlement from a grid with cartoons representing different parts of a village. The pupils then had to build the settlement, including the village green, the church, farmers' fields, nurseries and schools. The site was constrained, so the pupils had to decide what could be fitted in while still leaving enough open space. Areas were then identified for future conservation.

The second approach involved pupils visiting nearby Earsdon village. PAN devised a conservation and heritage quest booklet that identified routes through the villages to particular locations and landmarks. At each stage, the children had to answer questions about their history.

At three different locations, characters in period costumes played by volunteer group Time Bandits told



**Time Bandits: stories of village life**

their stories to the children. An "old lady" talked about the sword dances that took place in the village, while an "English gentleman", who lived in the manor house and was an inventor and a miner, recounted a pit disaster that happened in the 19th century. This prompted the children to get into conversation and created a sense of realism about village life and the rich history that lie behind its buildings.

PAN community planner Chris Anderson explains: "Our approach was a success as the study of local history proved to be a good introduction to geography and planning. The link with the Time Bandits was important. One youngster was even able to discover information about some ancestors."

*Kevin Lillie is PAN regional manager. He can be emailed at [ntco@planningaid.rtpi.org.uk](mailto:ntco@planningaid.rtpi.org.uk) or called on 0191 222 5776.*

# RTPI Bulletin Board

## Enter your team for London five-a-side football tournament

Excitement is building ahead of this year's RTPI London five-a-side football tournament sponsored by Indigo Planning. With just a few spaces left, there is still time for aspiring players to pit themselves against 15 other industry sides at Goals Wimbledon on 25 September. All you need is seven players who are working or seeking work in planning or a related profession such as architecture, surveying, geographical information systems or development economics, at least three of whom should be RTPI London members. Each team should also include at least two female and two male players.

For more information or to enter, please visit [www.rtpi.org.uk/rtpi\\_london](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/rtpi_london). A £70 deposit is needed to secure your place, to be returned on the evening.

## Time running out for cheaper conference tickets

Remember to buy your tickets for the Young Planners' Conference before 4 September to get them at £99 + VAT. After that date, the tickets will cost the standard £150 + VAT for the conference in Newcastle-Gateshead on 2-3 October.

For more information or to book, please visit [www.youngplannersconference.info](http://www.youngplannersconference.info) or email [ypconference@rtpi.org.uk](mailto:ypconference@rtpi.org.uk)

## Information sought on members' whereabouts

The RTPI would like to make contact with members Judith Ingram, John Kelleher and Xuan Liu.

Could the members or anyone who knows them please email [sandra.whitehead@rtpi.org.uk](mailto:sandra.whitehead@rtpi.org.uk) or call 01503 240815.

## Events

### Planners' Ball 2009

18 September. RTPI South East-South Coast Young Planners. Winchester Rugby Club.

This black tie event, supported by Winchester City Council, will begin with arrival drinks before a three-course meal with wine. Former RTPI president and chief planning inspector Chris Shepley will deliver the after-dinner speech.

Cost: £30.

For more information or to buy tickets, please email [carol.dawson@rtpi.org.uk](mailto:carol.dawson@rtpi.org.uk) or call 01304 823494.

### Planning Enforcement Update

28 September. RTPI South East-National Association for Planning Enforcement. Council Chamber, St Ives Road, Maidenhead.

This event will provide an insight into current issues in enforcement. Topics will include an overview on taking direct action, unauthorised waste disposal and links to planning, Gypsies and travellers, the householder permitted development rights introduced last year and a special enforcement law update.

Cost: £25 + VAT; £15 for unwaged.

To book, please email [carol.dawson@rtpi.org.uk](mailto:carol.dawson@rtpi.org.uk) or call 01304 823494.



**RTPI**  
mediation of space - making of place

## Evidence base and monitoring best practice

22 September 2009 • London

- Good and bad uses of evidence
- Housing
- Infrastructure
- The environment and sustainability
- Planning for prosperity and employment
- Retail and town centres
- LDF Evidence Base Good Practice

Chair: **Cristina Howick**, Partner, Roger Tym & Partners

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