

PIPA Conference 2009 – Delivering for the Upturn

A Report from Cllr Tim Wotherspoon, Policy and Performance Portfolio Holder South Cambridgeshire District Council

I attended the Politicians in Planning Association Conference on the above theme in London yesterday [Saturday 31st October], and here is my report.

PIPA is a group under the umbrella of the Royal Town Planning Institute. Membership is free and open to all planning Councillors. Check out www.rtpi.org.uk/politicians_in_planning_network/ to join. The event was sponsored by the [Planning Advisory Service](#).

Two key messages from the RTPI President were the need to retain expertise and maintain standards during the downturn. There was also an underlying anxiety manifest throughout the day that economic and financial uncertainties were headache enough without the need for political uncertainty as well. In fact we spent most of the day discussing things that the Conservatives are threatening to scrap, and given that close to a majority of Councillors are Conservatives there was a fair amount of disquiet in evidence.

(And the latest issue of "Planning" magazine with the cover story "Tories policy detail sought" is available in an online version here: <http://cde.cerosmedia.com/114adece1ce0179012.cde>. [It also contains an article on the Trumpington Meadows planning permission.]

We were welcomed by Cllr Alastair Moss of Westminster City Council and were told that they are still receiving 10,000 planning applications a year. Overall, Councils responding to an LGA survey reported planning applications down, but building control is in fact up on last year. Both of these may be consequences of extending permitted development to a wider class of small works, and the usual experience that home improvements are preferred to moving house when the market is sluggish.

The first main speaker was the Director of Case Management for the Infrastructure Planning Commission, which was established a month ago but will not be receiving applications until 1 March. He spoke of the fourteen National Planning Statements in preparation, which will set the criteria by which major infrastructure proposals (such as nuclear power stations and wind farms) are to be assessed. I believe all parties acknowledge that the national interest has to be weighed against possible local disbenefits, but whether a Commission drawn from a pool of forty good men and true is the most accountable way of doing so is a matter of much contention.

The second speaker was a member of the LGA Environment Board. One of his main points was that only 40 Core Strategies had been produced by this mid-year, out of 350 needed across the country. The point was made repeatedly whether any commercial enterprise would pretend to operate without a business plan - because that is essentially what the Local Development Framework ought to amount to for local authorities. (There was a lot of discussion whether Sustainable Community Strategies were a useful part of the process, and whether Local Economic Assessments (to become a new duty on upper tier councils) will complicate matters even further.)

In a recent issue of the Municipal Journal, John Healey, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, hailed local authorities as the unsung heroes in supporting people and businesses through the recession.

The head of Policy and Strategy at the Homes and Communities Agency, perhaps responding to recent criticisms that as the biggest development and regeneration agency in Europe the HCA runs against the grain of small is beautiful, emphasised the place-based approach to putting together locally appropriate programmes (called Local Investment Agreements). He took a lot of time explaining the Single Conversation business process on which they have been placing so much store.

The fundamental demographics driving housing demand are still there. The recession has had a big impact on effective demand, but the interventions that the HCA is making are partly about trying to sustain capacity in the system.

In introducing Cristina Howick, a consultant from Roger Tym and Partners, the RTPI President joked that economic forecasting had been invented to give astrology a good name. In fact, she turned out to be, for me, the most inspiring speaker.

She began by stating the obvious, namely that "recovery from recession" is announced prematurely - as soon as growth starts to pick up again. However, the consequence of GDP contraction is that the world has lost wealth, which is not expected to be regained for maybe a decade this time. That's a very long dip.

One implication is that most of our current development plans were written when the going was good, and much of their content has become meaningless in the context of a significantly changed global picture. In particular, her statement that many RSS targets are still based on views of the future which even at the time were absurdly optimistic was greeted with a chorus of "hear, hear". She went on to say they are now looking very stupid.

The main principle she wanted to get across was that planning should not constrain economic growth. There was a role for shifting activity to the right places, but not in stopping it from happening. It is a key plank of Planning Policy Statement 4 on Planning for Sustainable Economic Development [final version still awaiting publication] that planning should actively encourage economic growth, because economic growth is a reasonable guarantee of continuing prosperity and quality of life even if not the be-all and end-all of well-being.

Like all the speakers (and she was the most eloquent), she stressed that planning had to be much less parochial. Markets function at the sub-regional scale and upwards, and successful planning policy needs to do the same.

Questions covered the relationship between the Infrastructure Planning Commission and Local Planning Authorities, the exposure to losing appeals without a sound LDF and adequate five-year housing land supply, the implications of tight public sector finances for the effective future performance of local authority development management functions, and over-cautious monitoring officers keen to keep Members away from applicants more than necessary (when all the evidence points to much higher quality outcomes from detailed discussions before planning applications are finally determined).

The three breakout sessions I attended covered:

1 Local Infrastructure Planning - a pre-requisite of imposing a Community Infrastructure Levy or similar kind of tariff.

2 A game devised by the Standards Board for England to get elected members to think about possible pitfalls at all stages of the planning process - and not just deciding applications at the planning committee stage. I have brought a box back and will see whether we can set up an opportunity of playing it among ourselves.

3 The notion of Concept Statements as a way of effectively engaging the community and achieving high quality design.

By the way, "good design", and in particular local distinctiveness, were high on the agenda yesterday, with plenty of references to the fact that the 2008 Planning Act finally put the "desirability of achieving good design" on to the statute book [by amending Section 39 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 to spell out that in exercising functions with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development "the person or body must (in particular) have regard to the desirability of achieving good design"].

In his closing address, the RTPI President pointed out the obvious, that it was much easier to get elected on a platform opposing development than supporting it. But doesn't the current crisis call for leadership?

Spatial planning encapsulates so much more than what can be achieved by the grant or otherwise of planning permission, which is one reason why he urged that the Planning Director of a Council should always be on its Management Team.

With regard to the contentious relationship between local and national planning powers, he has, at the request of one of the main political parties but with the agreement of them all, set up an academic task force to examine how other countries do it and make recommendations for getting it better at home. While there is a general consensus that there has not been enough democratic input into regional spatial strategies, there seems to be an awareness, even among Conservatives, that some mechanism needs to be found to find the best sites for things that none of us would ideally like on the doorstep.

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