History of Planning in Wales

As part of RTPI Cymru’s celebration of the RTPI’s Centenary a series of articles on the History of Town and Country planning in Wales was published during 2014 in our quarterly newsletter, Cynllunio. All of these articles are brought together in this short publication.

This project was led by a small team including Clive James and Roger Tanner, with contributions from others, including Neil Harris.

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Why Wales is Different ... when it comes to planning

Roger Tanner introduces the history of planning in Wales.

Introduction

A new Wales Planning Bill is on the horizon and it will most likely confirm the specifically Welsh approach to planning that has been gathering momentum since devolution in the 1960s and in particular since the advent of the Welsh National Assembly in 1999. Is this a good thing though and is the distinctly Welsh approach being proposed the right one? This article attempts to provide an answer to the first question and perhaps provoke a few thoughts about the second one.

This piece is a precursor to a series of landmark articles that will appear in Cynllunio in 2014 that will consider the fortunes of planning in Wales over the past 100 years as part of the centenary celebrations of the Town Planning Institute (it did not become 'Royal' until much later). It rather audaciously attempts to summarise the previous 1,900 years of town planning in Wales in a few paragraphs that will both set the scene for next year’s more detailed deliberations and also draw attention to some aspects of the distinctiveness of Wales in planning terms.

Topography

Before considering historical influences on planning in Wales however, it would be appropriate to consider the huge impact that the topography of Wales has had on planning and development both in the past and the present. It is the topography of Wales that most obviously suggests a rationale for a distinctively Welsh approach to planning problems and opportunities. Extensive mountain ranges have prevented the coalescence of settlements into large cities, dictating instead a dispersed settlement pattern that demands in turn an efficient regional transport framework. Fast flowing rivers and streams present particular challenges and solutions for flood control but also opportunities for mini hydro schemes. The relative scarcity of flat easily developed land presents practical challenges to builders but also opportunities for more visually spectacular developments. With the sea surrounding Wales on three sides we should be adept at tackling declining seaside resorts and at least as advanced as the Scots at exploiting wave power. (I know, we aren’t).

The building professions in Wales should therefore be experts at building on hillsides and exploiting the opportunities offered by a sloping site. Yet examples of more imaginative use of sloping sites are rare. For example providing pedestrian and vehicular accesses at different levels, reversing the normal living room downstairs, bedrooms upstairs arrangements in order to take advantage of views and realising the potential to create visually dramatic developments. Yet too many Welsh homes are situated in the shadow of a mountain ridge line or are oriented away from the sunny south. These issues are not unique to Wales but their relative importance is very different to the priority factors across the border and so should loom much larger than they currently do in Welsh planning guidance and best practice.

Planning in Wales before 1913

The most important point to start with in a consideration of the history of urban Wales is that for the vast majority of Welsh history the country has been predominantly rural and the towns that did exist were alien colonies imposed in the wake of military conquest. Large historical cities never got the chance to evolve and grow in Wales, so our cities are of relatively recent origin and most of the urban population still lives in small towns and villages.

Although there is evidence of concentrated settlements in prehistoric British hill forts it was the Romans who first introduced urban centres into Britain and numerous towns, forts, and villas were built across southern Britain, including Wales, during four centuries of Roman rule. After the Romans left they fell into decay but while most of the Roman towns in England subsequently became thriving medieval towns this was not the case in Wales, where even today, Caerleon village occupies a small fraction of a still undiscovered Roman town whose intact walls surround it – a potential Welsh Pompeii! This reflected Welsh society and polity, which remained fragmented and fundamentally agricultural throughout the period of Welsh independence. Today it means that fortuitously, much of Roman Wales is not buried beneath extensive layers of later development but readily accessible in open fields, if only we had the inclination to explore and develop this potential tourism asset. While the Norman conquest and subsequent pacification of England took three years, it took them three centuries to conquer Wales. This is a crucial difference in the development of the two countries. In much of Wales the manorial system did not become entrenched in the way it did in rural England until much later in the Medieval period. For part of my planning qualifications I wrote a thesis comparing and contrasting Shrewsbury and Mynyddbach in Gwent. These two villages are less than half a mile apart but one is a typical English nucleated village whereas the other follows the Welsh pattern of scattered dwellings each master of its own little domain (no prizes for guessing which is which!). A debate is perhaps needed about how relevant the nucleated village model is in Wales given the historical and geographical context described above.

During the process of conquest another distinctive feature of Wales arose in the creation of an astonishing number of castles – even the smallest Welsh town of any antiquity boasts one of these iconic symbols of medieval power in its vicinity. Another legacy of the conquest period was the re-introduction of towns into Wales – and planned towns at that – in the form of the semi-military ‘bastides’ which formed the nucleus of English occupation in recently conquered areas. Over many centuries the military function of Welsh towns ceased to be relevant and the weekly market became the main driver for the creation of the settlements which evolved into the pre-industrial towns of Wales. In his book ‘The Towns of Wales’ Harold Carter identified 54 ‘market towns’ in Wales by 1611 (using Speed’s maps, some of which are reproduced here) of which 23 had some other administrative or judicial
function as well as a market. Four he classified as ‘Grade 1 towns’ (Brecon, Carmarthen, Denbigh and Caernarfon) by virtue of their being Chancery & Exchequer locations but all were tiny compared to the principal towns and cities in other European countries.

Settlement Pattern

The combination of topographical constraints and historical factors has produced a very distinctive settlement pattern in Wales. Although most of the population live in urban areas, a relatively small percentage (around 23%) live in cities, unlike most developed countries and England in particular. Urban Wales consists predominantly of small towns and high density urban villages, justifying in my view a distinctly Welsh approach to town planning.

For several decades now, what could be regarded as the ‘corporate sector’ both private and public, has been withdrawing from smaller towns and villages throughout the UK as the economic benefits of centralisation plus the ability to do business over the internet has diminished the need for a physical presence in every settlement. This presents a challenge to planners in every country but particularly in Wales where it affects a far greater proportion of the population. Part of the response should be to ensure that facilities are retained in at least part of each sub-region through the identification of appropriate centres for them and the development of effective transport links between service hubs and residential settlements in the area – in other words, regional planning!

So Wales does need a distinctive planning system – not to be different for the sake of it but to address the unique combination of planning challenges and opportunities that the history and topography of Wales has presented us with now and in the future.

Roger Tanner.

2 Ibid p. 53
The year 1947, and the passing of the planning Act is usually seen as the beginning of town and country planning in Wales and England. Yet the RTPI was founded 33 years previously. The earliest planning legislation for Great Britain was enacted five years before that year. Confused? Well, can you name any famous planners from Wales? I would like to suggest four.

T(homas) Alwyn Lloyd (1881 - 1960) was a Liverpool born architect turned town planner prominent in the interwar and early post war period. Having worked under Raymond Unwin on the Hampstead Garden Suburb, in 1913 he became the architect to the Welsh Town Planning and Housing Trust. He wrote the early planning text book ‘Planning in Town and Country’ which is dedicated to his wife with the dedication: “Hebdi ni ysgrifenasid”. In 1932 he wrote the bilingual pamphlet for the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales (CPRW) entitled ‘Brighter Welsh Villages’. Then in 1933/34 he became probably the only Welsh speaking President of the RTPI. The National Eisteddfod Medal for Architecture was endowed by him in 1954.

Clough Williams-Ellis (1883 - 1978) was born in England but inherited his family’s estate in north Wales. His books ‘England and the Octopus’ and ‘Britain and the Beast’ championed the conservation of the countryside. He was a founder member of the Council for the Preservation of Rural Wales and its chairman 1928 - 1947. However he was not proud of being the first chairman of the Stevenage New Town Commission in 1945. His most famous legacies are at Portmeirion and Plas Brondanw.

Patrick Abercrombie (1879 - 1957) was not Welsh, but as Professor of Civic Design at the University of Liverpool from 1915 was influential in North Wales where he sharpened his planning prowess. In 1918 he wrote ‘Mona Nova: the future development of Anglesey, with special reference to Housing after the War’ for the Welsh Housing and Development Association. His four themes were “the house itself; its exterior and garden; the village; and the island”. He notes that a joint housing committee of all the island’s local authorities was undertaking a survey for a report on housing conditions and future needs. He advocated a comprehensive regional survey of the island. Daniel Lleufer Thomas (1863 – 1940) was a social reformer. His ‘Regional Treatment of Housing and Development’ was a result the establishment of the Welsh School of Social Science in 1911 by Lleufer Thomas. It concentrated mainly upon social and community issues. From 1913 onwards the work of the Welsh Town Planning and Housing Trust promoted garden villages and suburbs.

The South Wales Garden Cities and Town Planning Association was founded in 1915. Then followed in 1916 the Welsh Housing and Development Association - the amalgamation of the South Wales Garden Cities and Town Planning Association and the Welsh Housing Association. It published a very interesting and informative yearbook until at least the early 1930s.

At the National Eisteddfod in Holyhead in 1927 the idea of a sister to the CPRE in Wales was first mooted at a meeting held under the auspices of the Cymmorodorion when Patrick Abercrombie was the main speaker. The CPRW was established the following year. In the interwar period the office was in London! Only he, C W E and T Alwyn Lloyd were the chairmen until 1959.

Problems in South Wales’ in 1919 advocated, amongst many ideas, improved inter valley road communications. He attended the Inter-Allied Town Planning Conference in Paris in 1919. A co-founder of Cardiff Workers’ Co-operative Building Society which built Rhiwbina Garden Village and other garden suburbs. His article ‘The Welsh Countryside: its need for a development plan’ appeared in the Transactions of the Cymmorodorion for 1922-23. These pioneers, and their contemporaries, worked within an evolving legislative framework. The first ever legislation in these islands to include the word ‘planning’ was the Housing, Town Planning, Etc., Act 1909. It aimed to create the ‘home healthy, town pleasant, city dignified, suburb salubrious’. This was the very first time that the word ‘amenity’ appears in legislation!

The following period of almost 40 years saw further planning related legislation enacted:

- The Housing and Town Planning Act, 1919
- The Local Government Act, 1929
- The Town and Country Planning Act, 1932
- The Restriction of Ribbon Development Act, 1935
- The Special Areas Act, 1935
- The Town and Country Planning (Interim Development) Act, 1943
- The Town and Country Planning Act, 1944.

As time passed the emphasis changes from a social housing and voluntary approach to mandatory legislation which extended into fields such as roads and employment together with the control of all development. How was Wales affected?

The development of planning led to the establishment of the Welsh School of Social Science in 1911 by Lleufer Thomas. It concentrated mainly upon social and community issues. From 1913 onwards the work of the Welsh Town Planning and Housing Trust promoted garden villages and suburbs.

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The pre-1947 period did not produce many plans as we now understand. One example was the Borough of Bangor Town Planning Scheme of 1934/35. As a result the peripheral planned suburb of Maesgeirchen came into being. In the July of 1935 the first Regional Conference of the National Housing and Town Planning Council was held in the City.

The Report of the South Wales Regional Survey...
Committee was published in 1921. The members included T Alwyn Lloyd, Patrick Abercrombie, Lleufer Thomas and George Pepler. It followed the now classic ‘Survey – Analysis – Plan’ approach. In response to overcrowding and lack of developable land in the still thriving mining valleys of South Wales it recommended the building of between 10 and 15 grouped housing schemes around the coalfield from where miners would commute by existing rail links to the collieries. Dormitory towns, again with rail commuting to pits, were suggested at Bridgend and Pontyclun. It was recommended that four Joint Town Planning Councils centred on Swansea, Newport, Bridgend and Cardiff were set up under the under 1919 Act. Were these the first city regions proposed for Wales?

Under the 1929 Act eight Regional Planning Schemes were proposed in Wales. These were for Deeside; east Glamorgan; mid Glamorgan; Afan and Neath; west Glamorgan; north Wales; Wrexham Region; and the Wye Valley (the first ever cross border plan?). How many were ever published? Abercrombie’s ‘North Wales Regional Planning Scheme’ was published in 1933. Then in 1936 under the Caernarvonshire Regional Planning Scheme the remainder of that county was covered by one planning scheme. There may have been an ‘Afan and Neath’ Plan as there is a reference to establishing a ‘national park’ in the Upper Neath Valley, to which higher ground in the Brecon Beacons and Carmarthenshire could be added at a later date. In 1936 H A Marquand, Professor of Industrial Relations at University College, Cardiff published ‘South Wales needs a Plan’. He called for a fully comprehensive plan for all walks of life, not just town and country planning.

In 1949 the ‘South Wales Outline Plan for the South Wales and Monmouthshire Development Area (exc. the Borough of Pembroke)’, by T Alwyn Lloyd assisted by Dewi-Prys Thomas, was published. It urged major new housing development at Cwmbran, Tonyrefail, Pontyclun and near Bridgend. There was to be a new town for 50,000 people at Mynyddislwyn. During this period there was a total lack of comprehensive planning to benefit rural Wales. In the depression after the First World War certain nationalist and radical movements in Wales, including Plaid Cymru, were watching the success of the Tennessee Valley Authority in eastern USA. By utilising the water resources of a rural area many times larger than Wales to generate electricity, provide rural electrification, improve transport and create temporary and permanent employment the rural economy and living conditions were transformed. Yet in Wales only a few small and larger developments. In south Wales the author’s native Swansea progressive actions are tended to be overlooked in favour of Cardiff.

1931. While supporting the principle for Snowdonia and the Pembrokeshire Coast, it did not propose definite areas. Was the water supply lobby the reason for excluding the Brecon Beacons? The area suggested for ‘Snowdonia’ extended much further east than the eventual post war designation.

What was missing in the rural planning of rural Wales in this period was the concept in Welsh of ‘Lles Cymdeithaso” - namely social welfare of benefit to the host area. This was the TVA approach. What happened was ‘Lles Llywodraethol’ - being the greater good for wider society, without any specific consideration of local benefit.

What were the visible results of the first forty years of statutory planning in Wales?

Garden Villages throughout Wales are one type of inheritance from this early period of planning. The Welsh Town Planning and Housing Trust promoted Welshpool, Wrecsam Acton Park, Llanidloes, Barry and Rhiwbrina.

All was not doom and gloom in the south Wales coalfield. More enlightened colliery owners built superior housing for their workforce at Llwynypia, Oakdale, Markham, Wylie and Cefn Fforest. The industrial estate at Trefforest was commenced. In rural areas the drowning of agricultural communities did at least lead to new planned villages at Cwm Elan and Llanwddyn. Aluminium manufacture lead to the building of a new village at Dolgarrog. Following the opening of Wales’ first oil refinery east of Swansea, Llandarcy village was built in the 1920s.

There is thus considerable visible and documentary evidence of the settlements of Wales being improved by planning under the early legislation and the vision of a few. In north Wales the City of Bangor is evidence to many small and larger developments. In south Wales the author’s native Swansea progressive actions are tended to be overlooked in favour of Cardiff.

Clive James
The South Wales Outline Plan was published in 1949, the year of my birth, which gives me some sort of tangential affinity with its authors. Today, when city-regions and regional planning have at last become real possibilities in South Wales, it is a fitting time to revisit one of the first attempts at a regional plan in Wales and indeed the UK – the 1947 South Wales Outline Plan.

The South Wales Outline Plan was commissioned in 1946 by the recently established Ministry of Town and Country Planning; its authors were Thomas Alwyn Lloyd and Herbert Jackson. Both were architect planners as indeed were most planners at the time and both were members of the then plain Town Planning Institute, T. Alwyn Lloyd being a past president in 1933/4 and founder member in 1914. Lloyd was very much the senior partner, 66 years old to Herbert Jackson’s 38. Lloyd’s publications included the charming ‘Brighter Welsh villages and how we can achieve them’ in 1931. Jackson had worked with the legendary Abercrombie on the West Midlands Plan.

The ‘South Wales Development Area’ did not follow political boundaries but comprised ‘industrial’ South Wales, including the Carmarthenshire coalfield, all of Glamorgan, parts of southern Brecknockshire and all of Monmouthshire excepting the rural east. This area had been one of four ‘Special Development Areas’ declared in the 1930s Depression. Internally the plan also ignored political boundaries, defining 20 functional ‘Planning Units’.

The Plan commenced with a ‘General Outline of the Region’ including maps of its Geology, Geography, farmland quality and broad land uses. Specific topic chapters on Industry and Commerce, Communications, Housing and Community Life etc followed, culminating in ‘Basic Proposals of the Plan’. A large number of accompanying photographs, many of them aerial, illustrate South Wales locations.

Fans of the current proposals for a ‘Metro’ rapid transport network in South East Wales will be intrigued or possibly depressed to realise that we actually had that network in 1946, as illustrated below but then trashed it in the 1960s and ‘70s. The meat of the Outline Plan was a no-holds barred tour around 25 Planning ‘Districts’. An extract from the Tawe Valley section gives a flavour of its approach;

“YSTALYFERA has suffered severely from closure of local collieries and tinworks. It has been described by one who knows the town well as being “built in a hurry 150 years ago”. Dating from the early ironworks period the town has inherited insanitary and badly sites dwellings and it manifestly lacks communal amenities. Some of the worst dwellings included double basements and similar improvisations to overcome site restrictions on steep hillsides. The only tolerable solution will be to clear these objectionable dwellings on the lower sides of the streets . . .”

I have used its assessment of Bargoed in some of my presentations on the regeneration of the town, contrasting its current situation with Lloyd and Jackson’s 1947 description of it as “a large grim mining town . . . requiring much tidying up and improvement.” The Bargoed colliery tip is described as “one of the most unsightly of the coalfield and a menace to land-uses in the immediate valley bottom”. It is alas unlikely that any modern plan will be able to assess the state of local towns and villages quite so frankly.

The most fascinating aspects of the Outline Plan to us today are whether its assessments still hold true and whether its proposals ever came about. For example, the plan contains a route for a South Wales motorway as far as Bridgend. The M4 built 20 to 30 years later follows the route almost exactly although interestingly the Plan also identified an ‘alternative route’ south of Newport. At that time Motorways were proposed as ‘one-purpose roads’ for through fast traffic. If only later planners had stuck to that concept instead of clustering development around motorway junctions and choking the M4 with commuter traffic.

New Towns were an emerging idea in the 1940s and the Outline plan proposed one at Pontllanfraith, noting that earlier reports in 1920 and 1932 had identified the area as suitable for a dormitory town. This proposal was subsequently rejected by the Minister and the chance of a focus of investment in the heart of the Valleys was lost. The new hospital for the area that the plan envisaged was built however – 64 years later.

In the preface to the plan the authors state; “We have attempted to apply certain fundamental principles for achieving what may be summarised as the physical framework for “Work, Homes and Play” for this Development Area. Within that framework, future growth should have maximum freedom to evolve in the light of what may prove to be differing circumstances from those that can be forecast at the present time.” – an admirable admission of the fallibility of projections and forecasts and the subsequent need for flexibility in plan making that modern planners could do well to note. This flexibility extended to identifying a ‘probable’ future population and a ‘possible’ future population and making provision for sites for development and for ‘reserve’ sites should there be a need for them.

Anticipating future recreational...
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needs the Plan identified not only the Brecon Beacons National Park but four substantial ‘Regional Parks’ in the Valleys, pre-dating the recent Valleys Regional Park concept by 60 years. Another hint at things to come was Lloyd and Jackson’s observation that; “we have explored a very interesting proposal affecting a portion of the now disused railway between Nant-Garw and Coryton (near Whitchurch) on the outskirts of Cardiff. If, as seems likely, that portion of the line becomes redundant, there are possibilities for utilising an excellent route as a walking track, and possibly for cycling also.”

How successful was the Outline Plan? In the mid 1940s ‘Outline Plans’ were envisaged, rather like outline planning applications, as broad proposals of principle, to be followed up by more detailed plans at a later date. It was not nor was intended to be what we would today consider to be a regional spatial strategy but it did identify areas suitable for growth or redevelopment in each of its 20 ‘planning units’. It was undeniably an epic piece of work by its joint authors - identifying land allocations for the whole or parts of 14 modern unitary authority areas and all done within two years!

It was not particularly well received at the time, however. The plan was finished in 1947 but the Ministry then sat on it for two years which must have been immensely frustrating for the authors, though worse was to come. For in the intervening period the Town and Country Planning Act was passed and it provisions came into being. Planning was to be framed on a political county basis, not regional. The Minister published an ‘Explanatory Memorandum’ to accompany the Plan. In 7 short pages it effectively sidelined the plan’s provisions, casting doubt on its population assumptions, its suggested allocations of land and the proposed new town at Pontllanfraith.

The minister proposed instead on the basis of a one paragraph analysis, that new towns should be built at Cwmbran and also Church Village near Llantrisant. The idea of a new town as a one-off initiative rather than part of a strategic regional plan is instructive. Cwmbran today is a successful and thriving town but it sits uneasily in the region’s settlement hierarchy, eclipsing Pontypool as the natural centre for the eastern Valley and rivalling nearby Newport as the principal shopping centre for Gwent. By contrast a new town at Pontllanfraith/Blackwood would have created a growth centre in the heart of the Valleys without threatening any established towns.

Although the Outline Plan was never adopted as official policy it was recommended to the newly formed Planning Authorities as the starting point for their own plan making under the 1948 Act. It is worth pointing out that the county councils did not manage to finish their statutory plans for over a decade during which time the Outline Plan was the only plan available. In the final analysis the close fit between the Plan’s proposals and the developments which actually took place over subsequent decades is the most telling tribute to the South Wales Outline Plan’s soundness and its place in Welsh Planning History.
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‘Make no little plans’: planning in Wales 1945-1996

Neil Harris discusses the post-1947 period up to the start of devolution of planning to Wales

Introduction

The title for this article is taken from the famous quote by American architect and planner Daniel Burnham. The quote captures planners’ ambitions during the post-war period in Wales. Planners and government dared to ‘make big plans’ during this golden era in planning history. As Sir Patrick Abercrombie remarked, “A decade in a swiftly evolving subject such as the science and art of Town and Country Planning is a long time”. So, capturing the five decades of planning in Wales following the Second World War is particularly challenging. This short history is a selective one, focusing on key events between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the period immediately prior to the devolution referendum in 1997.

The immediate post-War period

The challenges for planning in post-war Wales were varied. They ranged from reconstruction of urban centres, and providing housing to accommodate workers in the newly industrialised areas, to stemming rapid population decline in rural mid-Wales. Swansea was the most badly damaged of Wales’ settlements during the War, yet within a few years the Government reported considerable progress in the reconstruction of “the war-destroyed centre of Swansea”.

Planners’ skills in reconstructing Wales’ bomb-damaged towns were augmented with new skills in building new, planned communities. Cwmbran in South Wales is an example of a ‘Mark I New Town’, being the first generation of New Towns under the New Towns Act 1946. The principal reason for establishing Cwmbran was to provide housing for workers in the various industries in this area, and to reduce commuting across the region from existing settlements. The Cwmbran Development Corporation aimed “to set a standard of what a modern Industrial Town should be” and “to create a happy, friendly and pleasing town”. Special features of the town centre included “a system of permanent canopies attached to the shops, the segregation of pedestrians from vehicles and ample car parking”. Cwmbran was among the first settlements in Wales to be designed through a master plan, which was novel at the time, and generated a great deal of comment on the distinction between setting out a strategy and deferring consideration of details. The Cwmbran Development Corporation was keen to ensure Cwmbran was “not just a town of the planners”, and argued that “building a new town is in its essence a most human problem”.

Planning for developments in the post-War economy were also significant, with trading estates developed at Hirwaun, Treforest and Bridgend. In other parts of Wales, the clearance of derelict sites was a priority in the immediate post-War period, with generous grant funding to bring sites into recreational use. And, across Wales there was a significant concern for “depopulation of the Welsh countryside and impoverishment of the life of rural Wales”. These concerns led to the designation of Newtown in the Upper Severn Valley, following the appointment of the Mid-Wales Development Corporation in 1968. Some feared that “unless there was government intervention, Mid-Wales would become almost entirely depopulated”.

These tasks of construction and reconstruction were taking place as the landmark Town and Country Planning Act 1947 was being implemented. The effects of the Act in Wales were significant. The Act nationalised development rights, with over 45,000 claims made in Wales from

Above: The Master Plan for Cwmbran was based on the neighbourhood unit, with each neighbourhood related to the planned town centre. Cwmbran Development Corporation explained that a town of 35,000 population was “too big to be considered as a single unit” and that it “would involve too much travelling for the housewife to reach the shops”. The neighbourhood units provide for shops, schools, housing and public space, with detailed estimates of population.

Above: Cwmbran Development Corporation’s pamphlet emphasised Cwmbran’s strategic location. Note the reference to ‘A’ roads prior to construction of Britain’s motorway network and the Severn Bridge.
notes how in South Wales “it might seem the logical policy, at first sight, to abandon many of the mining towns in any future plan and think in terms of transferring the population to places where better conditions could be provided”. Yet the Outline Plan concluded differently, and instead aimed to increase the attractiveness and convenience of existing Valleys settlements. The plan and its critique highlight the grand visioning characteristic of the time, given the preparedness to entertain the abandonment of the existing settlement pattern.

The Government in 1951 also noted how “In Wales, it is particularly hard to reconcile modern development with the country’s extraordinary natural beauty”, a challenge thrown into sharp relief by proposals for hydro-electric schemes in north Wales. Various designations recognised this natural beauty, including the designation of Snowdonia (1951), Pembrokeshire Coast (1952) and Brecon Beacons (1957) National Parks. Britain’s first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the Gower followed quickly thereafter (1956), with further AONBs designated later in places including Ynys Mon and the Wye Valley.

The sixties and seventies

Planners in the late 1960s were faced with a changed development plans system, based on a system of Structure Plans and Local Plans, which was premised on distinguishing the strategic aspects of planning from the tactical ones. The opportunities and problems facing different parts of Wales in the late 1960s were captured in ‘Wales: The Way Ahead’. In North Wales, the growing tourist economy was replacing employment opportunities in other, declining sectors, and there was a need to manage the decline of the substantial, but temporary employment opportunities created by major engineering projects at, for example, Trawsfynydd and Wylfa. For West Wales, some parts of the area had been transformed by “the remarkable post-war development of the oil refining industry”. The period was one characterised by significant social and economic change. The 1960s and 1970s also witnessed the development of a distinctive institutional landscape for planning in Wales, with various organisations dedicated to planning and economic development. The establishment of the Welsh Office in 1965, shortly after creation of the Secretary of State for Wales post the preceding year, started to provide a particular, Welsh character to planning guidance. Wales was also equipped with its first and only planning school when Dewi-Pryns Thomas established the Department of Town Planning at University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology in 1966. Another important part of the institutional landscape in Wales was the Welsh Development Agency, which was established in 1976 and for thirty years engaged in various projects, including derelict land reclamation schemes and promoting inward investment and employment schemes across Wales. Similarly, the Development Board for Rural Wales, also established in 1976, became responsible for promoting mid-Wales and the continuing development of Newtown, while the Land Authority for Wales played a distinctive role in assembling land for development.

As for practices of this period, Colin Buchanan and Partners’ scheme for Cardiff (1968) provides a good example of techniques, styles and methods of planning of the era. The report embraced modernisation of the city and declared that “much of the city is either obsolete already or likely to be so before the end of the century”. And, as if to deliberately underline the value of foresight, Buchanan’s report noted that “the population [of Cardiff] seems certain to increase by the end of the century to an extent which cannot possibly be dealt with within the present city boundary”. This fervour for clearance and modernisation dramatically changed the townscape of many Welsh settlements. Market towns, such as Abergavenny, lost many significant buildings of historical and architectural interest through a quest for modernisation and to accommodate increasing road traffic. Wrexham too had plans made for comprehensive redevelopment of its town centre.

The eighties and nineties

The Government referendum on devolution to Wales in 1979 was firmly rejected by the Welsh people. This precipitated tensions through the following decade between Conservative governments at Westminster and a principally Labour-voting Wales. The 1980s consequently witnessed a series of initiatives that...
It is a period when new settlements were designated and implemented, and when genuinely strategic and sometimes radical ideas informed planning practice. None of those 'big plans' were easy to make; many were controversial, while others were radically altered, or even opposed, in their implementation. That optimism and ambition fades through the 1970s, with various plans abandoned and others scaled back. The art of plan-making and implementation, and the skills of strategic planning, can perhaps be revived...and maybe Wales' planners can make 'big plans' once more.

Neil Harris

References

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Brave New World - Planning under the Welsh Government 1997-2014

Roger Tanner looks at planning in Wales since devolution and the creation of the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Government

Creation of the National Assembly for Wales
Following a narrow vote in favour of a Welsh Assembly in the 1997 referendum, the Government of Wales Act 1998 defined the Assembly’s scope and powers. One striking and oft quoted section of the Act charged the Assembly with promoting sustainable development in the exercise of its functions. The first Assembly elections took place in May 1999 under a system of semi-proportional representation. No party secured an overall majority (then or since) but Labour assumed administration with Liberal Democrat support. Labour has been the governing party in Wales ever since, despite never winning an overall majority and having to form a coalition with Plaid Cymru from 2003 to 2007. For good or ill, this has resulted in a continuity in planning policy in Wales over the past 15 years that has not been replicated in the UK as a whole.

Casual abolition of Strategic Planning
A year before the 1997 referendum a fundamental change took place in Welsh local government with the replacement of eight counties and 37 district councils by 22 Unitary authorities (plus three additional planning authorities for the three National Park areas). The new authorities were each to produce a Unitary Development Plan or National Park Plan. When these became adopted they replaced the district local plans and county structure plans created by the 1968 Planning Act. In doing so, strategic planning in Wales was casually done away with, almost without comment. This was not because the two tier system of plans was thought to be flawed but simply because the county councils had been abolished. Another major change inherited by the new democratically elected administration was a single Planning Policy document for Wales, replacing some two dozen topic based guidance documents (PPGs). Curiously, the appendices to the topic based PPGs survived as Technical Advice Notes (TANs) which gradually came to take on a life of their own, sometimes approaching a level of policy content comparable to the old PPGs. These included in 2000, TAN 20 on planning and the Welsh Language; although the 2005 report, ‘Planning and the Welsh Language: the way forward’, commissioned by local planning authorities, was a more comprehensive assessment of this complex issue.

Today regional planning is back on the agenda, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Institute for Welsh Affairs – Wales’ very own think tank – which did much to bring new planning concepts such as city-regions and the public transport ‘Metro’ into public debate in Wales during this period. Whether Edwina Hart’s aspirations for city-regions based around Cardiff and Swansea can be integrated with the planning ministry’s plans for ‘Strategic Development Plans’ in the context of yet another revamp of local government in Wales remains to be seen.

The bonfire of Quangos
Labour had promised a ‘bonfire of quangos’ (Quasi-Autonomous Non Governmental Organisations) in the first Welsh Assembly election campaign. This duly took place, but in stages. The Land Authority for Wales and the Development Board for Rural Wales were absorbed into the Welsh Development Agency (WDA) in 1998, the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation was dissolved in 2000 and the WDA itself was absorbed into the Assembly’s civil service, along with the Wales Tourist Board and the post-16 educational body, ELWA, in 2006. While this greatly simplified the policy landscape, many have since questioned the wisdom of transferring these vital functions to the civil service. In the interim new quangos came and went. In the same year that the WDA was abolished, the Welsh Government established the Heads of the Valleys Programme to stimulate regeneration across six local authority areas in the South Wales coalfield. The initiative seemed to be successful and was subsequently replicated in Môn a Menai and five other areas of Wales only for them to be wound up when the cuts to the Assembly’s block grant began to bite in 2011. Newport Unlimited, Wales’ only Urban Development Corporation, was set up in 2003 to help regenerate that city but that too was discontinued in 2013. Today Wales is devoid of agencies dedicated to the regeneration of its cities and towns, though seven new Enterprise Zones were declared in 2011 ranging from central Cardiff to the whole of Anglesey.

Economic decline and population growth
Equally celebrated and deplored was the fact that West Wales and the Valleys, containing over 60% of the country’s population had such a low GDP that it qualified for the highest level of European Aid in the 2000-2006 ‘Objective 1’ programme. £1.3 billion of European aid flowed into the area but it seemed to make little difference as GDP in...
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West Wales and the Valleys and indeed Wales as a whole continued to fall relative to other parts of the UK and Europe. The area qualified for the next tranche of European funding in 2007-2013 and has qualified yet again for the 2014-2020 programme. Of the four depressed ‘Special Areas’ in the UK defined by the 1934 Act, the South Wales Valleys alone still qualify for the highest level of grant aid. While GDP does not seem to have responded to the repeated application of this funding, a quiet but positive transformation of the physical environment of many of the small town centres in West Wales and the Valleys took place during this period. This was achieved principally by local authorities, doggedly pursuing European Funds despite the overly bureaucratic application process devised by WEFO – the Wales European Funding Office.

While economic success proved to be frustratingly difficult to achieve, the 2011 Census revealed a halt to the 90 year decline in the population of the South Wales coalfield areas. The population of Wales passed the 3 million mark for the first time during this period and the growth of Cardiff was especially rapid as the number of its inhabitants increased by over 40,000 between 2001 and 2011. New centres of national life such as the Millennium rugby stadium and the Wales Millennium cultural centre accompanied Cardiff’s rapid growth in population and reflected the growing self confidence of the capital. During this time a nation that had organised an annual Eisteddfod on a different site for 100 years proved its ability to host major National and International events such as the Ryder Cup at Newport and the English FA cup at Cardiff when Wembley stadium was being rebuilt. Nor were iconic new national developments confined to Cardiff. In May 2000 the National Botanic Garden with its epic single domed glasshouse opened in Carmarthenshire.

Meanwhile an ongoing dilemma in rural Wales, in both Welsh speaking and English speaking small communities, is maintaining the balance between sufficient development to maintain a viable community whilst avoiding levels of development that would destroy its character and social cohesion. This key issue for rural Wales has yet to be satisfactorily addressed by a Welsh Government.

Carry on Planning
During the first Assembly administration a trend was set of Wales being different by omission – i.e. by not implementing changes or initiatives promoted by the UK government. This is not to say that there was a shortage of Welsh planning policy documents. In 2001 the first revision of Planning Policy Wales (PPW) was published but its content varied little from its English equivalents (still enshrined in dozens of PPGs). It was in the TANs that specifically Welsh planning policy began to emerge, especially with the publication of TAN 8 in 2005, which set a new precedent by identifying, in a guidance note, areas on a map where wind energy developments would be specifically encouraged.

Delivering for Wales
Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ government was keen to reform the planning system in England but the Labour administration in Wales was more cautious and produced its own specifically Welsh planning reform proposal – ‘Delivering for Wales’. This reflected the fortunate fact that we now had a Minister specifically responsible for planning in Wales, Sue Essex, who was herself a planner.

Above: TAN 8 map 1, which shows the seven strategic areas for wind energy
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system into a ‘portfolio’ of bits and pieces. Wales was spared such nonsense and stuck to the concept of unified, integrated development plans (now redefined as Local Development Plans) marking the beginning of a distinctive Welsh planning system. The results were reflected in the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Order Act. Most of the Act did not apply to Wales, which was protected from its pernicious content by Sue Essex through the insertion in effect of an ‘Act within an Act’ in the form of Section 6 which dealt solely with proposals for Wales.

The first of the new Welsh LDPs were adopted in 2010 and today Wales is well on the way to achieving full development plan coverage by the end of 2016.

The Wales Spatial Plan

Section 6 of the Act required the Welsh Government to produce a ‘Wales Spatial Plan’ (WSP). The first WSP duly appeared in 2004 following an orgy of workshops and stakeholder events. It was greeted by much fanfare at the time amid claims that Wales was now leading innovative planning in the UK but ultimately it was a big disappointment. Although the new LDPs had to ‘have regard to’ the WSP, it was not part of the development plan itself and ended up being largely ignored. The document was not created by planners and took pains to stress that it was not a ‘land use plan’ but consequently its content was vague and unoriginal – largely a summary of what different Welsh Government departments were planning to do anyway.

The Paths diverge

Successful Welsh governments had been keen to establish ‘clear red water’ between their administration and the more centrist policies of New Labour at Downing Street. ‘Collaboration’ not competition was to be the Welsh way. In 2010, however, a Conservative-led coalition government appeared at UK level and for the first time political control in Cardiff and Westminster was different. This heralded an acceleration of the divergence of domestic policy, including planning policy, in Wales from that in England.

Since 2010 the Welsh Government has maintained its ‘difference by omission’ policy by not imitating the UK government’s propensity for announcing an erratic stream of ad hoc one-off changes to the planning system. In no small part, this is because Wales is small enough to allow an annual meeting between the Minister responsible for planning and representatives of all 25 local planning authorities to discuss such issues and thus forestall ill thought out government initiatives. This is perhaps one of the principal benefits of devolution.

Thus the Welsh government has avoided imitating the ‘instant initiative’ approach both in its detail and in its sporadic nature. Instead, after much debate and investigation, a comprehensive reform of planning in Wales was proposed in ‘Positive Planning’ – a consultative document published at the end of 2013 that promised a comprehensive overhaul of the planning system in Wales while maintaining continuity and avoiding disruptive change to both development plan making and development management. ‘Positive Planning’ heralded a major planning Act applying solely to Wales – the Planning (Wales) Bill which is expected to be introduced this year.

Towards an age of Positive Planning?

Policy changes in planning take a long time to work through into changes on the ground and so it may be too early, even after 15 years, to say whether devolution has made a practical difference. While successive Welsh administrations have undoubtedly saved Wales from some unfortunate developments through not mimicking the chopping and changing of planning rules across the border, evidence of positive results of devolved planning are hard to identify. The Assembly has tried to live up to its brief to promote sustainable development by adopting more ambitious targets on alternative energy production, energy efficient homes and recycling of waste than would otherwise have been the case but this has been at the expense of economic progress in the view of some developers.

At the end of the day devolution does not in itself guarantee that life will get any better – that will depend on what use is made of the devolved powers. Now that the Assembly has been granted full law-making powers (following a huge vote in favour in the 2011 referendum) and is to be given at last the power to raise finance through borrowing, greater opportunities will be available to make a difference over the next 15 years. In the final article in this series in the next issue of Cynllunio, commentators from various sectors will speculate on whether this will indeed, make a difference to the environment, economy and society in Wales.

Roger Tanner, with thanks to Clive James for his input on rural Wales and the Welsh language.
Planning in Wales – The Future?

In the final installment of the History of Planning in Wales series, introduced by Roger Tanner, we hear from different perspectives about how they see the future of planning.

Preface

Over the past year Cynllunio has been running a series of major articles on Planning in Wales to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the RTPI (or plain TPI as it was in 1914). In last Winter’s edition I wrote a sort of preview, looking at development in Wales before 1914 and how this has created a country with distinctive planning issues. Clive James kicked off the anniversary proper in the Spring of this year with a look at Planning in Wales between the wars. In the summer edition, Cardiff University’s Neil Harris covered the era of ‘Big Plans’ between the 1947 Act and the devolution settlement and I finished off the 100 year coverage with an account of planning in Wales under the auspices of the National Assembly for Wales from 1999 to the present day.

In this final contribution to the series we look to the future. We asked four planners from very different backgrounds to look forward and give us their take on the future of planning in Wales, in particular in the context of the Planning (Wales) Bill, which promises to be a most significant event in the history of planning in the Principality. Lyn Powell, one of Wales’ most experienced planners, gives his personal view that while a new era is dawning, major problems with the new LDP system remain to be resolved. Tom Watson, chair of Young Planners Cymru, makes the point that the future of Welsh planning lies with young planners and recommends they maintain a “spark of mischievous excitement” which rather appeals to me I must say. Paul Milbourne gives an academic and generally positive perspective on the proposed Planning Bill and Emma Langmaid, the current chair of RTPI Cymru, finishes off the piece with a call for unity in the profession and for planners in Wales to work together “to ensure that planning is a catalyst for positive change in Wales”.

The private sector perspective:

For the first time in many years I am enthusiastic for our profession as planning, via the emerging Planning (Wales) Act, appears to be on the cusp of a much-needed transformation in Wales! Carl Sargent seems to be spot-on in concluding that planning has become over-bureaucratic, slow to deliver, and in need of shake-up. He appears to be intent on converting it into a productive, positive, responsive service that delivers when expected with minimal fuss and delay. Let’s all hope, therefore, that he realises that it is not just Local Government that needs to react positively to this; that he and the Welsh Government have a significant role to play in this initiative; and that Government has the funds, internal capacity, and knowledge base necessary to deliver as intended.

The apparent Welsh Government commitment to securing such improvements within a new, streamlined, political structure in Wales is also welcomed and overdue. The current local government structure is clearly of a scale that is totally out of kilter with the scale of the population that it represents and it needs to be streamlined through reform.

It is good to see the Welsh Government moving towards a form of regional planning. It is long overdue. However, it is a shame that the Government seems determined to delegate this move to local authority “collaboration” to achieve these new goals. Collaboration is simply not a firm-enough goal. It is merely, by its very nature, an invitation to talk, not to act. I would therefore urge the Minister to work with his colleagues to mandate, not request, the changes that are long overdue.

It is a shame that the Bill will not be abolishing the LDP system and that the current LDP process is merely to be tinkered with. The current system is not fit for purpose; it does not necessarily bring forward the best and most deliverable sites for development; it is time-consuming and very expensive for those who get involved in it; it requires those promoting candidate sites to submit a very expensive evidence base before the LPA has even established its preferred strategy; and the restriction placed on Inspectors to test just the “soundness” of the Plan is not conducive to the speedy delivery of development on the ground. Even with the proposed changes the development plan system will remain cumbersome, confusing, far too long-winded, and extremely expensive and time-consuming to engage in (for both local planning authorities and site owners / promoters). It will continue to fail to bring forward many of the most viable and developable sites; it will therefore continue to fail to ensure that a 5 year supply of housing land, for instance, is retained within the Wales.

I am also sceptical about the Welsh Government’s stated intention of providing an option to applicants to elect to have their applications, if they are deemed to be “developments of national significance”, determined by Welsh Ministers; and for applications to be “called-in” if Welsh Government considers that a particular local planning authority is designated as “under-performing”.

History tells us that the Welsh Government and its predecessors do not have the wherewithal or commitment to determine “called-in” applications expeditiously and that the process has done very little to make development management appear to be efficient. Instead it has presented applicants with a “black-hole” of confusion and delay and WG will therefore need to show convincing evidence that it has the necessary resources, skills, and willingness to meet these new objectives if its intentions are to be delivered in an acceptable manner.

Nevertheless it is a time of change that is much-needed and long-overdue. If fully exploited the future looks rewarding for the profession and presents it with project management opportunities that have not been present before. Planning can and should lead development; it should not just be responsive to it. If the planning process continues to be seen as an impediment to development, however, it will in many respects only have itself and the professionals that work within it to blame.
The History of Planning in Wales

Lyn Powell

The Young Planner:
A spark of mischievous excitement: young planners must harness the energy of the past to set their planning agenda for the future. The current generation of young planners in Wales have had their early careers set within a context of unprecedented planning reform across the UK. However, the process of reform in Wales has seemed markedly different to elsewhere. It has felt exciting and mischievously confident and the role of the planner has seemed more considered.

As we enter the second century of the RTPI however, the message to young planners entering the profession in Wales should be this: we are much more than the planning policy and legislation framework within which we operate. In Wales the development of the best planners over the last 100 years was not dictated by any policy and legislation landscape. We are more than process managers, land allocation machines or economic developers; do not let the UK media or economic developers; do not let the UK media or any experiences in your early career have you think otherwise.

But what is the future of young planners in the second century of the Institute here in Wales? Initially, we need to go back to the future. Sir Patrick Abercrombie, writing in 1933 said ‘the result of planning is more than a piece of skilful engineering or satisfactory hygiene or successful economics: it should be a social organisation and a work of art’¹. Now in 2014 we as planners must use the energy of the Abercrombie’s and the Ebenezer Howard’s, who were hungry for a better way of leading lives, and develop our own agenda for the next 100 years.

A certainty of any future planning agenda is that the need for skilled, innovative and resourceful young planners will continue in Wales. Those who are schooled in joined up working will be particularly valued, to lead other disciplines to plan for the future and create a more confident nation.

As it begins its second century, we have an increasingly important role to play in the RTPI. Young planners have a voice on the RTPI Cymru Management Board and we are invited directly to respond to consultations from the Institute and the Welsh Government. Free student membership for all those enrolled on an RTPI accredited degree will empower the Institute further through more active engagement.

Planners act as Welsh society’s conscience and planning is a verb, a science and an art. As we look forward to the second century of the RTPI and planning reform in Wales, it is imperative that young planners advocate these principles, whilst harnessing the spark of mischievous excitement that the Howard’s and Abercrombee’s were able to do so well.

Tom Watson, Chair of Young Planners Cymru

¹ L.P Abercrombie Town and County Planning (Oxford, 1933) p. 27

The Academic:
The Planning (Wales) Bill seeks to develop a planning system that meets the present and future needs of Wales. What is being proposed is a cultural shift in the way the planning system operates, involving a more integrated and proactive approach to development, which should allow planning and planners to play a more active role in addressing the economic, societal and environmental challenges facing different parts of the country.

It is pleasing to see the importance attached to the scalar dimensions of the planning system within the Bill, with attempts being made to develop meaningful connections between national, regional and local scales of operation. The National Development Framework enables the planning system to connect with national policy priorities while strategic and local plan making processes allow for consideration to be given to regional and local specificities. As is the case in England, developments of national significance will be dealt with centrally by Welsh Government Ministers and it will be interesting to see how this process of centralisation impacts on decisions relating to major infrastructural projects, such as renewable energy development in upland parts of Wales.

The Bill usefully recognises the fuzziness of official spatial boundaries and seeks to provide more innovative cross-authority approaches to planning. The emphasis
The RTPI Cymru Chair:

So where are we going with planning in Wales? I agree with much of the commentary surrounding the publication of the Planning (Wales) Bill that our system is in need of change, but I am also of the opinion that it’s not failing completely, as many would have you believe. I am firmly in the camp that the most important factor to ensuring we have a system and a set of planners fit for purpose is ‘culture change’ or put another way a change of mind-set. This change needs to happen across the board. It’s not just the age old adage that ‘local authority planners don’t understand the real world’; agents, applicants, consultees, elected members, developers, Welsh Government … We all need to play our part.

The legislation changes will pretty much take care of themselves, providing us all with a framework within which to operate and I’m not overly concerned by the proposals in the Bill (although trying to remain positive, I share the common concern regarding resourcing and wonder how we are going to tackle this) but my biggest fear is, we as planners and all those involved in the development process still seem to work against each other (of course there are exceptions to this, but they are just that). With a golden opportunity for developing a new way of planning in Wales, I want to remain positive and I don’t want the future to be like many of my experiences in the past.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again; planning is a team game, not an individual sport and I think this sometimes gets lost. I’d like us all to have an eye on the end goal – what is a proposed development trying to achieve? Who will benefit? Where is the real, tangible harm? We can’t stand still and we can’t stop building because we all need places to live, work and play. So let’s all work together to ensure that planning is the catalyst for positive change in Wales, delivering a sustainable future for us all.

Emma Langmaid, RTPI Cymru Chair 2014

Postscript

What of the future beyond the Planning (Wales) Act? Other major changes are also in the pipeline – not least another re-organisation of local government. Is it too much to hope that planners and our allies in government can ensure that the new authorities are based on rational, functional and strategic considerations rather than a crude nailing together of old authorities with medieval boundaries? The EU referendum in 2017 could see the UK leaving the European Union. Could Wales cope with the withdrawal of EU funding support that it has relied on for so long and develop its long neglected indigenous businesses? Can New Towns reappear on the planning agenda in Wales as part of the answer to the problems created by three decades of under investment in public housing?

An inevitable trend that will carry on into the future is the rationalisation of both public and private services resulting in closures of facilities in small towns and villages, which will have a disproportionate impact on a country like Wales where 75% still live in such communities. Or will the displacement of services in physical buildings by internet provision actually make small communities more viable in the future if high speed broadband and its future progeny can be provided throughout the nation?

It seems increasingly likely that the Welsh Assembly will steadily acquire increasing financial autonomy to match its recent acquisition of legislative powers. But Wales’ tax base is poor, making it more important than ever that our investment in infrastructure is properly planned to maximise its efficiency and potential. Can we rise to that challenge?

Will a properly planned public transport network enable the communities of the South Wales Valleys to at last realise their full potential by combining the best of both worlds – a rural environment, accessible and rich in biodiversity, combined with a full range of urban facilities both physical and virtual? Will Wales be able to capitalise on its potential for renewable energy and realise its aspirations to lead, not merely follow others, in the international fight to contain global warming?

You can see from the above that the future is composed of unanswered questions. Our contributors today are enthusiastic for our profession, see planners acting as the conscience of Welsh Society, working together to deliver a sustainable future for the nation. The message then, is that the answers to the questions posed above are largely in our own hands as Welsh planners, co-ordinating and enthusing other professions and even the politicians to realise that vision. In a small country like Wales small numbers of people can make a difference - especially if they are planners!

Roger Tanner