RTPI Cymru
Royal Town Planning Institute
Sefydliad Cynllunio Trefol Brenhinol

BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH COLLABORATION AND CHANGE

Making the most efficient and effective use of existing planning resources in Wales

UPDATE REPORT

RTPI Research Paper

MARCH 2024

RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 27,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors and over 1,300 members in Wales. Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social, environmental and cultural challenges.

Front cover image: Nick Treharne https://www.nicktreharne.com/

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This report is the update report to the main Building Capacity through Collaboration and Change report published in November 2023. This report refers to the Building Capacity through Collaboration and Change report (November 2023) as the 'main report'.

The Project

The Royal Town Planning Institute Cymru published its report in November 2023 on its 'Building Capacity through Collaboration and Change' project. This project explored the ways in which **existing resources in the planning system in Wales** can be used as efficiently and effectively as possible. The project builds on other recent projects that make a case for improved resourcing of the planning system.

The project had three aims:
- To identify examples of innovative practice that help to maintain and improve planning services and enhance planning outcomes within existing resource constraints
- To identify the conditions that enable local planning authorities, and other public organisations in planning, to innovate in how they deliver planning services as a way of dealing with limited resources
- To identify any barriers to local planning authorities and other planning organisations introducing new practices that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the use of their resources

The project findings were published in November 2023 are based on a desk-based review of recent reviews of planning services and a series of workshops with selected stakeholders. The project also identified **existing practices and potential changes to the planning system** that could deliver greater effectiveness and efficiency within current resources.

A Conversation: Having your say

We wanted to involve our members and others in **a continuing conversation** about how to make more effective and efficient use of current resources in the planning system in Wales. We invited people throughout December 2023 to let us know of any **interesting and innovative ideas** from within Wales or elsewhere that can help deliver an efficient and effective planning system.

This **update report** sets out the ideas that our members and others provided in our survey. We also include in this update report the executive summary from the original report and the recommendations made in the report.

We received **twenty-five separate responses** principally from planners working in the public and private sectors. Around 40 percent of respondents worked in a local planning authority, and around a quarter worked in the private sector. A further quarter of responses were received from politicians, landowners, developers and planners working in other public sector organisations.

What you told us about using resources more efficiently and effectively
We received a wide range of strategic and detailed ideas and suggestions for making more efficient and effective use of resources. Many of these ideas recognised the practical constraints currently impacting on resourcing of the planning system. Some responses highlighted issues cutting across the themes below, calling for an all-Wales strategic and operational resources plan that embraces collaboration, shared services, recruitment, training, and digital delivery platforms.

The five key themes and ideas identified through the survey are:
- Specialist input to planning decisions and access to expertise
- Commissioning a common operational and information platform
- Increasing the supply of qualified planners
- Secondments, exchange, and learning
- Widening the scope of fee-earning services

Specialist input to planning decisions and access to expertise

One of the principal themes raised by survey participants is the need to improve and widen access to specialist advice and support through the pooling of expertise between local planning authorities. Participants identified that this could be developed on a regional or even a national scale. The benefits identified by participants were in enhanced access to quality advice and input, retention of skills, potentially reduced costs, and more varied and engaging work for people working in specialist areas.

Areas where this expertise is in short supply and would be useful to make accessible on a pooled basis included heritage, conservation, design, landscape, ecology, and minerals and waste. Strategic infrastructure expertise was also identified as potentially useful to organise and deliver on a shared basis.

Some responses identified that work could be prioritised to identify the specialist areas that would benefit from delivery on a shared basis, identify 'host' local planning authorities, and develop an operational plan for service level agreements, funding, and charges. The conduct of a 'skills matrix' across local planning authorities could be a useful exercise in helping to take this idea forward.

Commissioning a common operational and information platform

Responses identified the very significant potential of commissioning a common, digital operating platform for planning services across local planning authorities. The strategic commissioning of software to support planning services was noted as needing significant leadership and financial commitment, but with very significant benefits to more efficient and effective delivery of planning services. This would be a collaborative and strategic investment of a scale requiring Welsh Government to act as a partner.

The design of a standalone and bespoke platform for planning services could also support clearer and more accessible information for the public, including website information, as well as embed Welsh Language provision in the conception and design of the system.

Increasing the supply of qualified planners

The ability to recruit and retain suitably qualified planners is challenging for many organisations, including local planning authorities. The survey respondents identified the need for a system of apprenticeships and bursaries across Wales, alongside graduate schemes, designed to help improve the number of people able to deliver the planning system.

Secondments, exchange, and learning

Some of the responses identified that the planning system in Wales could be designed and operated more efficiently by helping different actors to better appreciate each other's positions and experience. These respondents identified that national planning policies could be more effective and efficient if they were designed with a better appreciation of implementation and interpretation 'on the ground'. Similarly, some responses identified a need for secondment and exchange to help public sector and private sector planners to appreciate different sides to working inside the planning system to engender a more collaborative approach.

Widening the scope of fee-earning services

Responses identified that resources in the planning system could be enhanced through both extending the range of fee-charging services and increasing fees and penalties. Examples included increasing retrospective application fees as a deterrent, removing the 'free go', and increased charges for pre-application advice to enable investment in the service.

Additional ideas and comments

Several additional ideas of a more specific nature were also identified by participants in the survey, which are recorded here for completeness rather than forming recommendations at this time. They include:
- Reducing the number of local planning authorities in Wales to reduce managerial costs, enable increased efficiency and improved service resilience, and to provide improved career progression opportunities for planners
- Transferring National Park responsibilities to local authorities - as a way of building larger teams and enhancing access to specialist expertise – while still considering the special purposes of the National Parks in policy-making and decision-making
- Addressing the duplication of regulations by not imposing unnecessary planning conditions for matters already covered by regulations – with particular mention of sustainable drainage
- establishing planning more centrally at the heart of local authority economic regeneration
- enhancing national development management policies to address repetition of generalised policies at local level
- increase levels of delegation and simplify planning committee reports
- delegate decisions to community and town councils

What next?

Since the publication of the [Building Capacity through collaboration and change report](#) in November 2023 there has been much discussion and debate on the efficient and effective use of existing resources in planning. The main 'Building Capacity' report along with this update report, provides a strong evidence base to inform the RTPI Cymru's position on resourcing and capacity. We will continue to champion the recommendations set out in this work, supported by the RTPI Cymru Policy and Research Forum. If you would like any further information on our on-going work in this area, please contact walespolicy@rtpi.org.uk

Executive Summary: Main report

This project's findings are based on a desk-based review of recent reviews of planning services and a series of workshops with selected stakeholders. The project also identifies **existing practices and potential changes to the planning system** that could deliver greater effectiveness and efficiency within current resources.

The key findings of the **desk-based review** include:

- There has been a **significant decline in resources** in the planning system and this has impacted on the capacity of the planning system
- There is a lack of capacity in some local planning authorities due to **difficulties in recruiting and retaining planning staff**
- There are increasing demands of the planning system and an increase in stakeholder expectations – the planning system has been **trying to 'do more with less'**
- There is a **skills deficit** in some important but specialist areas of planning
- There is a need to improve some local planning authorities' **performance data and other workload information** to secure better and more focused use of their resources

The report identifies **existing good practice and potential for further development** of more effective and efficient planning services in Wales in five key areas:

- **Ensuring quality applications and decisions** – for example, helping landowners and developers bring forward suitable sites for inclusion in Local Development Plans, and supporting applicants and agents to provide good quality information when submitting planning applications
- **Building expertise and capacity** – for example, identifying those areas of specialist expertise that are in limited supply and exploring shared service models to sustain this expertise, as well as building planners' expertise and confidence more generally
- **Communications and information** – including making it easier for users of the planning service to find key information, managing planning enquiries in a more efficient way, and making planning and other data more accessible to the public and external users

- **Support systems and workload management** – for example, using systems that promote more timely and efficient management of staffing and other resources, as well as building better insight into how well planning services are performing
- **Strategy and prioritisation** – including working out what to focus on when resources are under pressure, as well as how planning services can connect with corporate priorities and their wider organisational context

Recommendations: Main report

The report identifies a series of recommended actions for the Institute working in partnership with other organisations involved in the planning system. These recommended actions include:

- Establishing **an effective performance management and monitoring system** for the planning system in Wales
- **Building capacity for sharing of good practice** in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of planning services
- Working collaboratively across organisations to build **high quality, accessible information and resources for users** of planning services

The report identifies the importance of **political and professional leadership**, as well as **collaboration** between different organisations, in developing a collective response to the challenge of resource constraints in planning.

Recommended Actions

This final section of the report sets our recommended actions for the RTPI Cymru working in partnership with a range of other organisations involved in the planning system in Wales. Collaborative working across various partners is essential in addressing the resources challenge in the planning system.

Key organisations involved in developing this work with the RTPI Cymru will include Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association, Planning Officers Society Wales, Planning Aid Wales, other professional and advisory bodies, statutory consultees, as well as planning consultants and developers.

R1. Welsh Government should review and re-establish a performance management and monitoring framework for the planning system in Wales.
The absence of up-to-date information means it is difficult to establish an understanding of how well the planning system across Wales is performing. This recommendation is intended to help all stakeholders in Wales better understand how efficiently and effectively the system is working – and may enable some analysis of changes in performance over time.

R2. Explore the establishment of a planning improvement service for Wales with the aim of sharing good practice, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system, and brokering common approaches and shared services.

A key issue raised by stakeholders in this project has been the absence of a strategic organisation to promote improvement in planning services in Wales. There are various models that could inform this work, including the Planning Advisory Service in England and more recent initiatives in Scotland in appointing a planning improvement 'champion'.

R3. Revisit and review the range of recommendations made in planning reforms since 2012.

The planning system in Wales has been the subject of a series of reviews in the period leading up to the Planning (Wales) Act 2015 and in the period since. The various reports and documents over the past decade include many recommendations for change – and a number of these recommendations are directed at what continue to be concerns and challenges for the planning system in Wales. This exercise of documenting and reviewing recommendations made since 2012 should include an assessment of those recommendations that have been accepted and progressed, and those that should be revisited and potentially implemented. This should include returning to the Welsh Government consultation exercise on delegation protocols for making decisions on planning applications.

R4. Conduct a review of public information for users of planning services on local planning authorities' websites. This should form the basis for developing a set of core and commonly-used information that local planning authorities can direct users to.

This recommendation is designed to prevent each local planning authority directing its resources to general information on the planning system and how it works. The work can ensure that core information is simple, well-designed and accessible to all users of the planning system. This work could also extend to identifying a wider range of resources and materials where a single common approach across local planning authorities is possible.

R5. The Royal Town Planning Institute Cymru and other partners – including Welsh Local Government Association and Planning Officers Society Wales - should identify those areas of specialist expertise that are 'at risk' in terms of providing effective input to planning decisions and plan-making. This work should then extend to exploration of whether it would be appropriate to deliver these inputs on a shared services basis.

The services provided in Wales on a shared basis appear to have initially been prompted by a need to ensure that planning decisions were made effectively with appropriate specialist expertise and input. These services being offered on a shared basis has also had other positive outcomes. The building of regional inventories of expertise could be a useful component of this work. A further extension of this work could build data on the 'pipeline' of planners, to include future recruitment needs and areas of specialism that need to be reinforced in terms of capacity.

R6. Planning Officers Society Wales working with strategic partners should promote the sharing of information on planning support systems being used by local planning authorities in Wales.

This recommendation should start to build a better picture of some of the medium- and longer-term opportunities for commissioning or developing improved back-office support systems for planning services. This work could include identifying future requirements and timescales for any renewal and investment, and is designed to enable coordination in commissioning of new systems.

R7. Support the building of thematic groups to enable early and mid-career planners to informally share experience and expertise across different organisations.

Participants in workshops identified the value in informally sharing experiences and challenges on specific areas of planning work they are engaged in. The building of thematic groups across Wales or within regions within Wales could have significant value in upskilling planners and building their confidence. The thematic groups have the potential of meeting virtually for informal networking and sharing of practical case studies.

R8. Examine the potential for further fee-based, income-generating activities for planning services additional to existing services in development management.

This work could also extend to the promotion of more focused use of pre-application advice services to ensure that services provided are high quality, add value, and are delivered on a cost-effective basis.

R9. Develop material on how planning services and functions can support local planning authorities and other organisations in delivering on their corporate objectives and priorities.

The purpose of this work it to try and better connect planning services with the wider corporate context – and demonstrate that planning can be supportive of strategic priorities. The placemaking and wellbeing agendas in Wales could provide a valuable opportunity to reconnect planning with high-level political agendas.

R10. Map the training provided to elected members and other decision makers in the planning system, identify priority planning issues for elected member training, and develop resources to support further training.

Making planning decisions is an important responsibility and it is important that all decision-makers have a good understanding of core principles and practices in the planning system in Wales. This work may also consider the issue mandatory training for elected members on planning committees and those with responsibility for local development plans.

For more information about the RTPI Cymru's policy work

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