West Midlands Planning Summit

Thursday 30th November 2017
The Repertory Theatre, Birmingham

Planning delegates from across the West Midlands gathered for an extremely useful and insightful day on this extremely cold but crisp November day. It was great to see a wide range of planners from both the public and private sector alongside academia and, of course, retired planners! Most attendees I spoke to said how they really appreciated the opportunity this Summit afforded to think more broadly than in their day-to-day jobs about the technological, demographic and economic trends which are (and will affect) the shape and transform the planning of the future.

Part I: A Vision of the Future: Our changing world and what it could mean for planning and development

After an extremely pleasant but cold walk through the German Christmas Market and morning refreshments at the Rep, *Craig Jordan* (Chair, RTPI West Midlands/ Head of Economic Growth, Lichfield District Council) introduced the Summit and explained that it sought to replicate the success of last year's summit and be a stimulating and insightful day.

Maria Dunn (Planning Policy Manager, Worcester City Council / Incoming RTPI West Midlands Chair 2018) then chaired the first session.

Dr. Rick Robinson (until recently Director of Technology, Amey, now Smart Cities, Infrastructure and Property Leader, Arup) then gave an incredibly interesting and informative keynote speech about how technological innovation is changing the world, including the astonishing fact that more data has been created in the past 2 years than in the entire history of the human race. However, Rick warned that these changes were also widening income inequality and increasingly concentrating wealth into the hands of asset holders. Nevertheless, he also suggested ways in which technology could be used to the benefit of planning such as the 'Heineken Project' in Staffordshire whereby technology was used to coordinate the work of various utility and infrastructure providers when digging up the roads. It was estimated that this project saved around £2 million. Indeed, Rick stressed the importance of getting public-private partnership 'right' so that they deliver positive social outcomes. He also highlighted the key role that social enterprise can play in delivering social outcomes.

Tim German (Senior Stakeholder Manager, Energy Systems Catapult) then outlined the varied and very valuable work that the catapults are undertaking in supporting the Smart City agenda. Tim spoke in particular about the role that energy can play in this agenda including the need to integrate energy generation for transport, electricity and heat which have traditionally been separate in households and subject to market failure. Tim highlighted how heat, in particular, accounts for 33% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions and how 50% of these emissions in turn come from the domestic sector because gas powered boilers generate 88% of domestic heating. Tim then outlined how this could be addressed through

developing Local Area Energy Frameworks, local carbon targets and Cost Optimal Heating System Pathways. However, Tim cautioned that while increasing energy is relatively straightforward in new build homes and social housing (though cost is clearly an issue here), it is much harder implementing it in privately rented and owner occupied homes.

Roland Bolton (Senior Director, Strategic Planning Research Unit, DLP Planning) then spoke about demographics and how this is projected to change in the future, including the growing proportion of older people (especially the above 85 year olds). He helpfully showed a map which showing the future spatial disruption of where these older people will live and how, instead of living in cities, they typically will be located in rural areas like the South-West and East-Anglia with all the challenges that this will bring. At the same time, he spoke of how Brexit could significantly reduce the working age population. Roland then evaluated the pros and cons of older people remaining in their family homes which are typically under-occupied. For example, older people often have emotional attachment and informal care support networks in their family homes but these homes are also often unsuitable for their needs and cause the real problem of under-occupation. However, he argued that the solution is not necessarily a land use one but ultimately a political one. We can either significantly increase the land supply to enable older people to stay in their own homes or introduce a 'bedroom tax' for older people to penalise them into downsizing.

Nick Grayson (Climate Change and Sustainability Manager, Birmingham City Council) then spoke of how important green infrastructure is to everything which we do. He highlighted that, whereas it has been undervalued in the past, natural capital accounting and valuation will become vital in the economy in the future, especially in the context of the UN's *New Urban Agenda*. He argued that, although the NPPF stressed the need for no net loss of green infrastructure in new developments, the policy aim should be to *increase* the amount of green infrastructure. Nick then outlined some practical ways this has been applied in Birmingham including mapping the 'supply' and 'demand' of biodiversity, local climate and recreation. He also said that both the Langley Sustainable Urban Extension in Birmingham's Green Belt and the HS2 route aim to be net positive in terms of green infrastructure. He concluded that green infrastructure should be at the heart of policy through the 'Star Framework' rather than just an 'add on'.

Part II: What does this mean for built environment professionals and the planning system?

After a hearty lunch, further interesting conversations and a quick breath of fresh air, the second half of the day was chaired by *Daniel G. Wilson* (Barton Willmore / RTPI WM Young Planners' Committee).

Technology

First up was *Paul Evans* (Spatial Planning Consultant) who gave a talk on the very topical issue of building techniques. He stressed how conservative the British construction sector is with around 70% of the UK's new built homes being on-site, masonry construction which is very labour intensive. However, he did highlight that there has been some improvement in masonry construction with cavity wall insulation. Although alternatives are emerging such as timber and steel framed construction where important lessons, such as around thermal overheating, have been learnt. Paul stressed that there is still the need for rapid change through highlighting the *Farmer Review of the UK Construction Labour Model* which underlines how the dominance of masonry construction has led to building material and labour shortages (which could be exacerbated by Brexit) and is a relatively 'slow' method of building when demand for housing is extremely high. Indeed, Paul argued that off-site factory manufacture could lead to up-skilling alongside high quality, modern design although there is a wide variety in the degree to which homes can be manufactured off-site. Paul concluded by showing some examples of where this is already taking place including

Craylands Estate, Basildon, New Islington, Manchester and where off-site experimentation is taking place at the Explore Industrial Park (Nottingham) and Skanska's 'flying factories' in Slough.

Ina Dimireva (Smart Cities Consultant, Arup) then spoke on the Global Review on Smart City Stratgeies which Arup has been conducting. She started by arguing that the Smart City agenda developed because it was (and is) perceived as being very beneficial for businesses with the market predicted to grow from $313bn to $757bn in 2020. Moreover, most cities see it as being economically beneficial through greater efficiency and quality in public services although cities are now increasingly recognising the social benefits of Smart Cities including creating more equitable and inclusive cities. Indeed, Ina argued that quality of life is now the main reason why cities are implementing Smart City strategies. She then highlighted how most cities are seeking to pursue a Smart City approach through collaboration and most have produced a stand-alone policy document. Ina argued, however, that Smart City approaches work best when integrated and embedded into existing statutory frameworks and where there is strong political leadership.

Demographics

Hugh Barton (Emeritus Professor, University of West of England) then highlighted the challenges of the UK's ageing population including the fact that the proportion of the population aged over 65 will rise from 14% in 1974 to 25% in 2045. However, he also presented some very sobering statistics on how longevity is stagnating, even declining, due to inequality which is widening. He argued that planning bears some responsibility for this due to the fact that housing cost are arguably the most important factor in determining disposable income and quality of life. Indeed, Hugh highlighted how many new developments have been too car based and with too few social facilities which is especially problematic for older people who cannot drive. He therefore argued that, drawing inspiration from Freiburg, development needs to be much more centred around public transport, have more facilities and be socially mixed. Nevertheless, he explained how, in Germany and other European countries, this is possible because local councils have much greater fiscal powers to buy land, at existing use value, and then prepare it through providing infrastructure and facilities financed by the land value uplift. He argued for a similar system in the UK as others like Peter Hall in *Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism*.

Ian MacLeod (Assistant Director Planning, Birmingham City Council) then gave a fascinating case study talk on the regeneration of East Birmingham and North Solihull (EBNS). Ian highlighted how this area has a population of around 300,000 people making it comparable to the size of Newcastle or Nottingham! Ian firstly outlined what a challenging area it is through presenting lots of very sobering facts including that, within eight stops on the Cross City Line into Birmingham from Four Oaks, life expectancy declines 9 years. Indeed, nearly 40% of EBNS residents have no qualifications. Ian outlined how through transport improvements, like the Metro extension and new railway stations at the Fort and Castle Bromwich, the Council hoped that connectivity would be improved and that local residents would be able to reach the job opportunities available at the Airport/NEC and the City Centre. However, he still conceded that parts of the area would still have very poor public transport links. He also outlined the Council's *Comprehensive Approach* to EBNS, which includes bringing the key stakeholders together like the NHS, local Schools and FE

Colleges, and the Council's *Housing Infrastructure Fund Bid* which aims to unlock sites for housing like the former Yardley Sewage Works. He concluded by highlighting that the Council is producing a Masterplan for the area.

<u>Urban Form/Natural Capital</u>

Professor Rob MacKenzie (University of Birmingham) then spoke about the pressing issue of air quality and highlighted how 50,000 premature deaths are caused by it in the UK. He then explained the chemistry of air pollution, including nitrogen dioxide, and argued that urban form will still continue to be important in the future even with clean, electric, non-polluting cars due to particulate matter from road surface erosion. Rob then explained the importance of open space for air circulation and how, especially hedges on the roadside, can be vital at shielding pedestrians from the worst effects of air pollution. He also spoke about the potential of different types of trees to reduce air pollution including how trees can actually increase pollution concentrations in street canyons and, in certain places, can contribute to ozone and smog. Consequently, he recommended establishing whether an area is 'at risk' of ozone smog and therefore whether a local study needed to be conducted.

Michael Vout (Urban Designer) was the final speaker of the day who began by outlining the various, completely contrasting utopian and dystopian views of future cities. He then spoke of the importance of creativity in planning including the need for a balance between unity and variety in cities and the need for high quality design which he thought that documents like *Building for Life* ensured. In particular he credited Alan Fletcher's *The Art of Looking Sideways* as being a key read in developing creativity!

John Acres (RTPI Vice President) then gave an excellent, concise summary to the day, especially how informative and inspirational it was in enabling us as planners to 'think outside the box' about the future. I totally agree with this conclusion and hope that the RTPI runs another event like this. In the meantime, after the Conference delegates then wended their way back from the Rep through the sights and sounds of the German Christmas Market to New Street Station!

Charles Goode is a PhD candidate in Urban and Regional Planning and is evaluating whether reforming the Green Belt is a feasible solution to Britain's housing crisis. He is very interested in the views of RTPI members on this topic- feel free to contact via email: charlesgoode@hotmail.co.uk!