

Susan Bridge

Inauguration speech

January 18 2023

Good afternoon to you all especially to my guests and fellow members of the RTPI, and thanks to Tim for his wonderful valedictory, summing up a successful year.

For those of you joining us via our live stream from around the UK and globally, from the Commonwealth Association of Planners and many of our international sister institutes, may I also offer you a warm welcome.

In my long career I have worked with many talented and dedicated planners to whom I give my thanks, not only for having the opportunity to work with and for you, but also for some really great and fun times – you know who you are! I also have to thank two wonderful past Presidents who have in turn encouraged and cajoled me to become active in the affairs of the institute, Martin Willey and Vincent Goodstadt, without them I would not have stood for the Board, then the Chair of the Board or for President. As Chair of the Board for the last three and half years, I also thank my fellow trustees and the dedicated and professional staff for their support. I wish the new Chair, Meeta Kaur every success for her next three years in the Chair. Last but not least, I thank my family, especially my long-suffering husband, for their support. On a very personal note, my parents are no longer with us, but I know how proud they would be to see me today.

I stood for President because I have been lucky enough to work as a town planner for local government, then for a major housebuilder and after 13 years returning to local government as head of planning for a large borough council and am now working as an independent planning consultant, so have experience of planning on both sides of the fence, game keeper turned poacher and then back again, working in so many aspects of our system. I entered the profession to work for the common good, as did you all, and that is the same whichever sector we work in. As planners, we all want to create great places,



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where people want to live, work and play; healthy places which nourish us and the world about us. This is our shared ambition.

The President's inaugural speech will usually deal with the planning issue of the day, the climate emergency, health and wellbeing and so on, matters which go to the heart of our profession. This year, the critical matter of importance is you, us, planners. We face many challenges and misunderstandings about what we do and how we do it. I want to talk about two of those today, namely the resourcing of the planning sector and the public understanding of our mission. I also want to set out what I hope to achieve during my presidential year.

I see the problems around planning services in my day job, particularly, but not exclusively, in local government. Anecdotally, we are all aware of the shortages and difficulties local government faces. The facts, published by the RTPI last September, are that local authority net expenditure on planning has fallen by 43%, since 2009. Just 0.45% of local government budgets are allocated to planning services in England. In Scotland expenditure fell by 38% and in Wales by 52% over the same period. Scotland has lost of quarter of planning department staff in that time. These are shocking statistics.

Even more shocking, between 2016 and 2021 only 8% of job postings for 'Town Planning Officers' were for public sector roles. The stats bear out what we know and experience every day. The public sector is under resourced and understaffed resulting in under performance and stress. This neglect of planning services in the public sector has of course a knock-on effect on the private sector. Decisions are not being made in a timely manner putting stress on planning consultants who cannot deliver for their clients, putting stress on clients and developers as targets are not met, costs rise, houses are not being built and reputations are damaged as a result. We are all adversely affected, directly and indirectly and so is the economy of our country. This situation is unacceptable and unsustainable.

It is also no secret that at some point in our careers, we will almost certainly face intimidation from the public and by those who should know better, including councillors and community representatives. I have had, in the past, occasion to call the police and post security at the door of planning committee when things have got out of hand, but never so bad as chairs being thrown, as in one well publicised incident last year. I know of one planning officer, posting a site notice

very recently, who was verbally assaulted in the street by a local resident. This resident also raised Cain in the pre-application public exhibition, threatening the applicant's consultant team. This type of intimidation and abuse is anecdotally getting worse. We should also look at the role of social media, which has to take some of the blame for the decline in public standards and needs to be called out.

At the same time, planners and planning services are being told to deliver more and more with less and less. The cracks are showing as the planning stats demonstrate.

These cracks are not just within the service, but personally. We are all becoming more aware of the importance of caring for our mental as well as our physical health. The website already has a mental health hub which signposts helpful information and organisations. But the well-being of planners requires attention before it gets worse. That is why the RTPI has launched its legal and well-being helplines across the UK, as the first step in responding to this desperate situation. I am pleased to be able to announce that from today, RTPI members will have free access to the My Healthy Advantage app and online portal from Health Assured. This includes wellbeing resources such as webinars, videos, podcasts and guides on topics such as resilience at work, nutrition and stress management, as well as a 4-week self-help programmes. The RTPI's free telephone legal helpline offers straightforward and friendly legal advice. Just visit the dedicated RTPI Plus webpage where you will find the details, including telephone numbers.

In addition, some important work flowing from Pillar 1 of the Corporate Strategy, The Value of Membership, is reaching a conclusion. These work streams are vital in promoting the Institute and supporting our members through raising the profile of planning, not only the contribution of planning to the environment and the economy but also the value of being members of the RTPI. Only 75% of domestic planners are members of the Institute, we need to persuade the remaining 25% of the benefits of being Chartered. A clear Member Value Proposition is being developed with a relevant and comprehensive membership offering, to provide the rationale for members to join and renew their membership, knowing that the RTPI is there to support them in practical ways, from the welfare and legal helplines to relevant, easily accessible and reasonably priced CPD. There has never been a better time to be a member of

the RTPI. If you know someone working as a planner who isn't yet chartered, make them aware of the benefits of membership. Encourage them to join – there is more than one route to membership.

However, all this does not address the systemic and underlying issues we face. The lack of resources and the shortage of qualified planners impacts on all aspects of our lives as planning is one of the most important functions that governments, both national and local, has to improve the lives of their residents. As an Institute we are doing our bit to help address the acute shortage of planners. Our apprenticeship programme has seen the first apprentices reach full Chartership in 2022 and there are now over 500 in the pipeline. This new route to Chartership is proving to be successful. Last year we grew the number of Licentiates working towards Chartership by 8.5%. This is wonderful news for the future, but in the short-term we are lobbying Government to categorise town planners as a shortage occupation to qualify under the Skilled Workers programme.

Externally, how much of what planners do and their value to society is understood and appreciated by the public, who are the people we serve? In January 2022 we launched Planning Your World to increase the public perception of planning and its importance to the economy and value to the community. The website, which aims to attract new entrants to the profession, came about after a survey of 2,000 members of the public in July 2021 demonstrated that whilst the majority, 73.2% claimed to understand the role of town planners in society, it was apparent that that they did not truly comprehend what the role of planners is, with only 28.5% of participants recognising our influence on the economy and with only 37.4% recognising that planning can influence issues around climate change and the environment. Since January 2022 the website has had more than 20,200 visitors.

Until now, most of our campaigns have been largely directed towards national governments. But, without sustained and significant pressure from below, there is little incentive for governments to put scarce resources into activities that are not seen as critically important to their electors. We need to improve our public profile and understanding. Apart from Planning Your World, other measures have already been taken, most notably the relaunch of the Politicians in Planning Network which currently has over 500 members. To those planners in local



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government – get your planning committee members and portfolio holders to sign up to the Network.

The task of improving public perception is not just mine, as the President for 2023, it is not just the RTPI as a professional member organisation, it is one for all of you. Our external facing work is vitally important in raising the profile of planning through our excellent policy, practice and research papers to our public and external affairs. The member bulletins and The Planner all contain information on the RTPI campaigns, policy, research and practice notes, so please keep yourselves informed so that you too can influence the debate. In my visits to the Nations and Regions this year, I will be asking you to demonstrate what steps have been taken to raise the profile of planning locally. I will be asking if and how the winners of the regional and national planning awards been celebrated in their localities.

It is down to us to demonstrate the value of development. As we have seen, people don't understand the positive impacts developments can have on climate, society and the economy let alone the positive benefits through planning agreements, for example, on their local areas. We need to make that case and help communities understand that planning decisions are not done to them, but with and for them. No one else will do this for us.

To do this we need to ensure that influencers and decision makers are listening to our messages, which I see as the single biggest challenge for the profession – how do we get them to listen? If we do not get them to listen, we will fail our communities. Speaking out to show how planning can be used as a positive tool- from the climate emergency through to planning reform is essential. Through our public affairs activity we are building and maintaining relationships in Westminster, the devolved nations and Ireland, with civil servants and local government to get this message across, as well as to influence new legislation and policy and to caution against risks to the planning system.

To be successful, we need to go to governments with solutions – and that cannot just be more money, it also needs to be smarter ways of working. As President I intend to do my bit in this regard. Using existing RTPI research, I will be instigating, what for want of a better term, I call The Great Debate. Each meeting of the General Assembly will be invited to debate a current topic, not to discuss problems, but to find positive solutions that can be put to decision



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makers, especially those in national governments. These discussions can be carried on at local level during the year, at the end of which I intend to pull together, with the help of the research and comms teams into a report setting out positive solutions for planning in the 21st Century. I have already received suggestions for topics and will be publishing an agenda for the year shortly setting out the four key topics for debate. I will also be inviting our sister organisations to participate in the discussions and to join forces to influence the debate, speaking with one voice.

2023 is going to be an important year, policy changes are not just occurring in England. Members in England may be asking if I am going to address the latest proposed amendments to the NPPF and the consultation document on planning reform. This is not the time or the place. Our newly formed England Policy Committee will be considering the RTPI's response to the consultation following regional workshops to guide the response.

In Scotland the 4th National Planning Framework was approved on the 11th of January, which puts planners front and centre of efforts to tackle the climate emergency and nature crisis. In Wales, policy is already strong in maintaining and enhancing biodiversity through the planning process, but further consultation is expected on strengthening the resilience of ecosystems and biodiversity. In Ireland the new Minister for State responsible for planning will be taking forward a new planning bill which will propose fundamental reforms of parts of the planning system. There is hope that there will be an Executive this year in Northern Ireland.

But the RTPI is also a global institution, we have members in 80 countries, accredited planning schools in Hong Kong, South Africa and Ireland as well as the home nations. The RTPI is working with the Global Planners Network to promote the importance of good planning across the world. Change is coming. We can see this in the Middle East where many of our members are working on exciting and sustainable projects as well as developing policies and plans for the future. We are looking to COP 28 in the autumn, when we will emphasising how important planning is at local, national and global level to achieving the UNs Sustainable Development goals.

In preparing this speech I reminded myself of our vision and mission as set out in the Corporate Strategy, which I summarise - to promote healthy, socially



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inclusive, economically and environmentally sustainable places, working for the common good and wellbeing of current and future generations. These are noble aims and remind us that planning is the golden thread which pulls all these together. Planning is powerful but we need the tools to do the job, and it's up to all of us to go out and get them and make our voices heard.