

plaNIIt

NI Chair 2024

Chris Bryson MRTPI has taken up his role as Chair of RTPI NI, taking over from Catharine McWhirter. Here he sets out his intention for the year ahead.

Planning has long been castigated in public opinion as the scapegoat for poor development; with little or no recognition of good planning. This perception of planning has not been helped in recent years with the scathing reports from the NI Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. Although, it is difficult to argue with the conclusions of either report. I think the majority of planners will agree that the planning system is not operating and functioning as it should, for a number of reasons, and hopefully both reports will act as a 'wake-up' call to those in power who can engender change.

Whilst we could wallow in self-pity, accept the brokenness of the planning system and 'muddle through'; there is hope for improvement and reason to be positive. A fully functioning, and properly resourced, planning system will bring significant economic and societal benefits and the cost of improving the system, I believe, will be dwarfed by these benefits.

To drive forward the change that is needed, planning needs to be near the top of the agenda for all decision-makers and the only way to bring this focus is to take more pride in what we do as planners and promote this vision of a planning system that benefits all of society. Only then will those in power sit up and take notice of the potential of planning and make moves to improve the system. So – a fairly easy task lies ahead! No doubt it will be challenging but I think it would be remiss of us all, as planning professionals, not to be more positive and promote the role of planning in any way we can. That is what my focus will be as Chair in 2024.



Catharine McWhirter reflects on her past year as Chair on the next pages.

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RTPI NI Executive Committee 2024

Chair:	Chris Bryson
Senior Vice Chair:	Emma Aldridge
Junior Vice Chair:	Nick Salt
Immediate Past Chair:	Catharine McWhirter
GA* Representative:	Vacant
Corporate Members:	Chris Blair Sophie Burch Catherine McKinney Diane O'Neill

There are 2 vacancies for Corporate Members

Student / Licentiate: Justin McHenry
Emily Wray

Co-Opted Member: Áine McBeth

Full details of the Committee can be found here: www.rtpi.org.uk/find-your-rtpi/rtpi-nations/rtpi-northern-ireland/committees/

(*GA is the RTPI's General Assembly)

Welcome to the winter edition

Welcome to the Winter Edition of PlaNIt.

We welcomed our new Committee in November and we have some new members, which is great to have. We do have some vacancies for Chartered members including as our General Assembly Representative - this is an exciting role - representing the voice of Northern Ireland in UK and Ireland policy debates. If you're interested please contact Julie Sullivan. Sadly we said farewell to a number of members who have provided valuable contributions over their terms including Carol Ramsey, Alistair Beggs, Cathy McKeary, Erin Donaldson, Mura Quigley and Lisa Curran. I give a personal thanks for all their support.

Thank you to Catharine McWhirter for her successful year as Chair of NI - always enthusiastically taking on her duties with a smile too. We welcome Chris Bryson to his year as Chair.

Huge congratulations to TSA Planning - crowned Small Planning Consultancy of the Year - fighting off competition from across the UK. Congratulations also to two finalists from Northern Ireland: Game of Thrones Studio Tour - submitted by Resolve Planning - Excellence in Planning for a Successful Economy and Enniskillen Workhouse - submitted by Fermanagh & Omagh DC - Excellence in Planning for Heritage and Culture.

In this edition of PlaNIt we feedback on the survey we launched at the NI Planning Conference in September - the NI Big Conversation - which lifts the lid on what it's like to work in planning at the current time - a missing part of the discussion around the performance of the planning system. The report doesn't paint a rosy picture, but does give evidence of where improvements could be focused.

I sign off this newsletter by saying farewell as I move on to a new role outside the RTPI after 16 years - 11 years as Director for Northern Ireland. Thank you to everyone that has supported me during this time and made me feel very welcome. A huge thanks go to all the volunteers, particularly the Chairs, I have worked with and the officer team - Claire Williamson, Hannah Flynn, Joanna Drennan and of course Julie Sullivan, who has kept me right.

The next Director will be Mark Hand, who will start on 1st March 2024. Mark is currently Head of Placemaking, Highways and Flooding at Monmouthshire County Council, and brings with him over 20 years of experience as a planning practitioner. I wish Mark every success in the role.

Roisin Willmott, Editor

Congratulations to our newest Chartered Town Planners



It is with great pleasure we welcome the RTPI's newest Chartered Town Planners in Northern Ireland.

The most recently elected Chartered Town Planners in Northern Ireland are:

- Niall Carr, Genesis Planning Consultants
- Melissa Martin, Capita PLC
- Laura McCausland, Lisburn and Castlereagh District Council
- Ryan Watt, Turley

(Note those more recently being awarded Chartered status will appear in the next edition of PlaNIt).

For further information and to keep updated, please refer to our website: www.rtpi.org.uk/membership/ The website includes resources to support you make the step to becoming a Chartered Town Planner, including guidance, podcasts, FAQs and dates for briefing events.

RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence: Small Planning Consultancy of the Year *TSA Planning*



TSA Planning was named as RTPI NI's Small Consultancy of the Year earlier this year and progressed to be judged alongside winning small planning consultancies from across the UK. At our Awards ceremony in November in London, they were crowned Small Planning Consultancy of the Year in the RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence - the team is pictured below receiving their Award from Krishnan Guru Murthy.

The Judges' view:

The Judges applauded TSA planning for its commitment to diversity and supportive culture within the team. TSA Planning shows excellent examples of multidisciplinary working, project management and managing relationships including public engagement and first planning performance agreement.



Outgoing Chair reflects on 2023

I'm sure everyone says the same at this stage in the year – this year has flown by and while we have achieved so much, there is still so much more to do.

At the start of the year, we were still dealing with Covid recovery and people were wary of attending face to face events, but over the last 12 months that has changed and people are embracing the freedom to choose, as well as the option to avail of technology to keep in touch.

Our events this year have been a mixture of both.

In December 2022, I attended the RTPI's Incoming Chair's Welcome Event in London. It was great to see how we are part of a much bigger machine.

We had the Annual Dinner in March at the Mac, which was well attended and some great conversations.

I chaired the webinar on renewable energy into historic settings with 70 people listening in. Out of my comfort zone, but was fascinating to hear about new techniques used in historic settings.

We had the Welcome Event in June at the Ulster Museum which was again well attended. Great to see our young planners mixing and chatting with those of us who have more years' experience.

The President's visit to Northern Ireland was active and particularly well received. Sue Bridge whole heartedly threw herself into meeting staff at UU, the consultants and TSA Planning, and even more so she enjoyed the visit to the Game of Thrones Studio!

We met in Hillsborough for lunch, after which I took Sue on a tour around the village pointing out recent development, many of which have been supported by Belfast Region City Deal.

November Annual Planning Law Update. 120 had registered to hear from William Orbinson KC, Andrea Kells and Mark Watson, PAC and Brendan Martyn, Clever Fulton Rankin. Fascinating insight into current case law, with some take away lessons particularly for development management officers, and people considering being involved in judicial reviews. Also plenty to read if you get time!

All of this supplemented by Committee meetings throughout the year.

Heartfelt thanks to the Committee and especially to Julie and Roisin. Julie is calm and efficient and always has papers as well as us in the right place at the right time. Thanks also to Roisin. As you know Roisin is leaving us after almost 11 years in NI, which has flown by, but is a huge loss of knowledge for us locally. Roisin has been our champion over those years and has ensured that Northern Ireland stays firmly on the RTPI national agenda. For all this and for being our champion, thank you.

At this stage I am happy to hand over to Chris Bryson, the incoming Chair. I wish you every success for next year and I look forward to supporting you in your work as Chair.

Catharine McWhirter MRTPI, RTPI NI Chair 2023



The potential contribution of planning to biodiversity conservation and enhancement in Northern Ireland, in the post-Brexit context

The UK's withdrawal from the European Union is both a challenge and an opportunity for environmental protection in general and biodiversity in particular. All parts of the UK have made, or are in the process of making, changes to their biodiversity laws in the wake of Brexit. These changes will have considerable implications for planning. New developments in Northern Ireland include a requirement on the Executive to publish an environmental improvement plan and the establishment of a new environmental law 'watchdog', the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP).

RTPI NI and the Ulster University School of Law hosted a roundtable of planning and biodiversity experts in September 2023. Participants discussed what changes to the legislative and policy framework, planning system and broader environmental governance structures might improve planning's contribution to biodiversity as part of its overall objective of the sustainable development of Northern Ireland.

A number of key findings emerged:

- Northern Ireland's planning system has become fragmented, with regional planning policy statements in the process of being replaced by local development plans. With no regional strategic plan and only a very limited statutory biodiversity duty, there is a risk that nature will be sidelined in favour of other priorities, such as housing.
- Knowledge of and investment in biodiversity is limited, notably among councillors, who are now key players in the planning system. Training for elected representatives and public education are required, but stronger statutory duties are needed for these to be prioritised.
- Biodiversity net gain requirements should be approached with caution. They can be a useful tool, but there is a danger that over-emphasis on overall biodiversity metrics may distract attention from conserving the species and habitats that exist on a site prior to development.
- Climate change is now taken seriously at all levels of government. This can crowd out biodiversity when decisions are made, but also provides a model for raising the profile of biodiversity.
- Brexit brings particular challenges for biodiversity in border areas due to uncertainty about whether planning decisions in the Republic of Ireland need to take account of impacts on protected sites in Northern Ireland.
- Appropriate monitoring and enforcement are essential if improvements to planning legislation and policy are to result in better biodiversity outcomes in practice.

The political context remains uncertain, if not unpromising. It is unclear when the Assembly and Executive will return, and very difficult to get Northern Ireland-specific legislation onto the UK Parliament's agenda. Nonetheless, there may be opportunities to develop training and public awareness work. The planning and biodiversity policy community can also make the case for the changes it feels are required – like statutory targets, the right approach to biodiversity net gain and enforcement – when the devolved institutions resume business.

The full report can be read at: www.rtpi.org.uk/research/2023/december/biodiversity-in-planning-in-post-brexit-northern-ireland/

NI Big Conversation

Planning plays a crucial role in delivering a wide range of valuable outcomes – addressing the climate and biodiversity emergencies, economic development and supporting communities across Northern Ireland.

However, it is widely recognised that Councils, along with the wider public sector, are struggling to meet expectations and unlock the value planning has to offer. RTPI NI recognises that addressing this at the current time is not straightforward and there is a need to consider a range of solutions.

In September we launched a Big Conversation to gauge the well-being of planners in Northern Ireland, and to explore the issues, impacts, causes and potential solutions to support the profession deliver the planning system.

Through a survey we drilled down to understand better where the pressures are, and how this is affecting those working in the system. We wanted to learn about good practice which is being used to address issues and possible action which could assist in relieving pressures. Thank you to everyone who responded to our call to complete the survey.

Some of the headlines are:

- 63% of all respondents reported being overstretched at least several times a week
- Rises to 83% of those working in a council planning department
- Planning Portal and Modern Gov has increased the admin and workload
- There are weaknesses in how Planning Committees and Councillors are operating in relation to planning
- Availability of specialist officers including ecologists and highways officers is a problem
- How statutory consultees relate to the planning system causes holdups
- 53% said social media had, at least somewhat, an effect on their well-being – leading to mis-information
- The public understanding of planning is low

The report of our findings are available to be read here: www.rtpi.org.uk/bigconversationni/.

These findings from this Big Conversation will be used to develop our own work programme and inform DfI and other relevant stakeholders, so they can also address issues raised.



It takes Planners &

On World Town Planning Day in November, the RTPI launched its campaign to tackle the misconceptions about planning and celebrate the vital role that planners play as partners in our planning system.

It's a campaign you can join in with too - information on how to get involved can be found here: www.planningyourworld.org.uk/get-involved/



RTPI President Visit to Northern Ireland

Sue Bridge, RTPI President spent two days in Northern Ireland during September. She had a busy few days, starting with a meeting with local planning consultants, to learn about the issues they face. She was then hosted by Neale Blair and Claire Williamson at Ulster University on a tour of the new Belfast building and facilities.

In the afternoon she was hosted by Tom Stokes and his team at TSA Planning Ltd for some very wet site visits. That evening she had dinner with members of the NI Executive Committee.

On her second day Sue visited Linen Mill Studios, home to the Game of Thrones Studio Tour - a



winner in NI Awards for Planning Excellence - where she met with David Brown, Director of the Studio and Damien McLoughlin of Resolve Planning.

Finally she met with Catharine McWhirter, RTPI NI Chair in Hillsborough to see the projects undertaken in the town.



Awards Judges we need you!

Exciting opportunity for RTPI members - The Awards for Planning Excellence are important to the RTPI and the profession, they carry prestige. As a judge, you are carrying out an important role. Depending on the volume of entries we require more than one judging panel and we are looking for talented individuals to join a database of potential judges we can call on for the local awards in Northern Ireland for next year and subsequent years. If you have a passion for planning, sustainability and urban design we would like to hear from you!



The judging period for 2024 will be from March to May with the time commitment (depending on entries) being around 8-10 hours for discussion meetings, shortlisting, online judging and candidate interviews and 1-3 days for site visits.

If you would like to be considered for a voluntary judging role please contact northernireland@rtpi.org.uk for further information.

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www.rtpi.org.uk/profile



RTPI Northern Ireland Northern Ireland Planning Conference



Embracing the plan-led system in Northern Ireland

Wednesday 6th September 2023



