

Branchout **NEWS**

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Cover Image
Stonehenge on
Salisbury Plain
in Wiltshire

Branchout is a members e-magazine issued three times of year. After a recent review of content, Branchout will now focus on RTPI member updates, local interest articles and practical guidance on a variety of planning issues.

Branchout is put together by

Editor Harry Quartermain

RTPI Junior Vice Chair

Charlotte Daborn

RTPI South West Regional Coordinator

plus the support of many RTPI volunteers

If you would like to prepare an article or provide feedback on what you would like to see in future editions, please contact southwest@rtpi.org.uk

The articles contained in this and past editions of Branchout are made available for educational purposes only. The views expressed in it are those of the authors. The authors or RTPI accept no responsibility for the accuracy of the contents. Readers are encouraged to undertake additional research on the themes explored for the latest updates.

Special Mention - 50 Years of Volunteering Award goes to Mike Oakley

A special award was presented to Mike at the recent RTPI South West Summer Reception by RTPI SW Chair Alexis Edwards and RTPI President Lindsey Richards in celebration of what will be 50 years of volunteering for the RTPI by the end of this year.

Mike has been serving on the South West Branch since 1975 and notes he has been in every role from Chairman to Secretary except for Treasurer so there is still time for that yet! He has also served on what was then called RTPI National Council and has been involved with the regional awards for 19 years. Mike is a great asset with a fountain of knowledge and always keen to support a range of projects and input his thoughts.

Nominations for regional committees are opening this Autumn. If you are interested in giving back to the institute, sharing your skills & experience then **please contact** Charlotte.Daborn@rtpi.org.uk for a chat about the range of opportunities available.

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01 Legal Update

Caselaw

R (on the application of Finch on behalf of the Weald Action Group) (Appellant) v Surrey County Council and others (Respondents) [2024] UKSC 20:

Sarah Finch on behalf of the Weald Action Group has successfully challenged the grant of planning permission for oil production in Surrey, in a groundbreaking decision by the Supreme Court.

On 27 September 2019, Surrey County Council ("the Council") granted planning permission for the retention and expansion of an existing onshore oil well, to include the drilling of four additional wells to be extracted over a 20-year period. The nature of the development required an Environmental Impact Assessment ("EIA") to be undertaken, such that the detrimental impacts to the environment could be considered during the decision-making process. Whilst initially advising the developer that all greenhouse gas emissions would need to be included within the scope of the EIA, including those produced on burning the extracted and refined oil, the Council subsequently accepted an environmental statement which merely considered the direct releases of greenhouse gases from the development site. Permission was granted on the consideration of these environmental impacts only.

Local resident Sarah Finch sought judicial review of the decision on the basis that it was unlawful for the Council to restrict the scope of the EIA in this way. With the claim dismissed by the High Court and the Court of Appeal, Ms Finch appealed to the Supreme Court.

The key question for the Supreme Court appeal was whether the greenhouse gas emissions produced on burning the extracted oil, ought to have been included within the EIA. More precisely, whether, for the purposes of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017, the emissions could be considered an effect of the proposed development.

In a three to two majority verdict, the Supreme Court allowed the appeal, concluding that the subsequent emissions from burning the extracted and refined oil were an inevitable, foreseeable and quantifiable impact of the development.

Following the judgment, local planning authorities will now have to consider 'downstream' impacts under EIAs, altering the decision-making process for all future large scale development projects in the UK, in particular, those infrastructure projects involving the extraction of fossil fuels.

The Finch case will have impacts on the assessment of other types of EIA development - including large scale residential schemes.

THRINGS

SOLICITORS



01 Legal Update

R (C.G.Fry & Son Limited) v Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities & Anor [2024] EWCA Civ 730

An application to overturn Somerset Council's refusal to discharge conditions attached to a planning permission for a mixed development including up to 650 dwellings has been dismissed by the Court of Appeal.

The case turned on the application of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 ("the Habitat Regulations") and whether the requirement for an appropriate conservation assessment could be requested from the developer at the discharge of conditions and reserved matters stage. Reserved matters provide specific details for each aspect of a development and are the final hurdle for full planning permission following the grant of outline permission. C.G.Fry & Son Limited ("C.G. Fry") sought to discharge conditions on the approval of reserved matters, which would permit the construction of Phase 3 of the development to become lawful. The proposed development site is within close proximity of a protected Ramsar site and the River Tone.

Somerset Council refused to discharge the conditions on the basis that an appropriate assessment under the Habitat Regulations had not been undertaken and thus the impact of the development on the local environment could not be ascertained. C.G. Fry appealed to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the basis that the question of harm to the Ramsar site had arisen too late in the course of the decision-making process for an appropriate assessment to be required. The Secretary of State dismissed the appeal, providing that the nature of the Habitat Regulations is to protect against harm and properly interpreted, the Regulations required an appropriate assessment at this stage. A section 288 statutory review application to the High Court was also dismissed.



C.G. Fry appealed to the Court of Appeal, which agreed with the High Court on all counts, dismissing the appeal. It was held that the Habitat Regulations require an appropriate assessment to be undertaken before a project is given approval, and that this requirement applies irrespective of the stage the planning process has reached.

THRINGS Planning and Environment lawyers have extensive experience in navigating complex local and national planning policy legislation and has successfully supported commercial and residential applications through the approval and appeal processes.

To find out more and for advice on your development proposals, including how to address enforcement notices, please do get in touch:-

www.thrings.com/en-gb/services/commercial-property/planning



02 Reflections from a Visiting Professor of Planning in Plymouth

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For two months this past winter, I had the privilege of being a Visiting Professor at the University of Plymouth's MSc Planning programme in the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences. On a sabbatical leave from my home unit at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada, I was warmly welcomed by the School's faculty and students. Saskatoon is the largest city in the prairie province of Saskatchewan, just as Plymouth is in relation to Devon. Both cities have roughly the same population size, though Plymouth has had centuries more time for its urban evolution than my home city has. With one of the first Conservation Areas in England, Plymouth's Barbican neighbourhood was to me a case study in how to pair a thriving commercial and residential community with centuries of built and cultural heritage.

City centres

It was fascinating to learn from Stephen Essex about Plymouth's city centre which, after extensive bombing during World-War-Two, was treated as a blank canvas upon which the internationally acclaimed British planner, Sir Patrick Abercrombie, worked to create

a new masterplan in 1943. That plan, which guided post-war reconstruction, along with David Mackay's 2004 vision, still guides many dimensions of city centre planning today. During a fieldtrip with MSc Planning students, faculty, and local planners, I learned about how Plymouth's beautiful city centre faces many of the same challenges as Saskatoon's. Both cities are deeply involved in revitalizing significant parts of their city centres. Both are keen to grow the number of residents in the city centre to activate the positive feedback loop between an enlarged population, greater public space activity, thriving shops and services, and civic pride. It was inspiring to see that the presence of the University had stimulated significant private investment in student housing in the city centre, signaling to me that this is a community that understands the importance of major public institutions working together to tackle complex problems, such as housing and city centre revitalization.

02 Reflections from a Visiting Professor of Planning in Plymouth

Plymouth's city centre seems to me very well positioned to achieve its revitalization goals, proactively putting together public realm improvements, setting clear priorities for both new private and public development at higher intensity and for conservation priorities that protect the distinctive sense of place. Plymouth seems to be off to a stronger start than Saskatoon in the challenging task of converting undercapitalized commercial buildings to new residential uses. As an outsider looking in, I think the area along Armada Way south of Royal Parade toward the Hoe is a very attractive area for intensified residential development, positioned between the city's signature public space at the Hoe, and the vitality of the city centre's services, culture, and commerce. As economic cycles bring new investment over time, Plymouth seems positioned with a clear planning framework to make the most of it.

National urban parks

Bordering Dartmoor National Park, one of the most magical natural and cultural landscapes in England, I am envious of the people of Plymouth and Devon. Not to mention that sites across Dartmoor provided the inspiration for one of my favourite novels, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes "The Hound of the Baskervilles". But another kind of national park captured my imagination as well. Plymouth and its regional partners have begun the process of creating the UK's first national marine park. This at a time when in my home city we are working through our local conservation organization, the Meewasin Valley Authority, to create a national urban park that will be among the first in the country under a new initiative by Parks Canada to create at least one such park in each province. This was an invaluable opportunity to share knowledge on how to plan and implement a national park in an urban context, and affirm the critical importance of doing so in an urban world where generations of people need to have access to transformative experiences in nature, and to become its guardians.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have shared planning experiences with colleagues and students at the University of Plymouth and in Devon, and hope that we will continue to find opportunities for exchange in years to come.

Author: Ryan Walker
Professor of Planning
University of Saskatchewan,
Canada



Plymouth seems positioned with a clear planning framework to make the most of it.

03 Wiltshire Council

Wiltshire Council is on a mission to build one of the best performing planning authorities in the country.

Context

Wiltshire Council has launched an ambitious transformation programme to turn its planning service into one of the country's top performing local planning authorities. This programme follows on from a 2023 Peer Review carried out by the Planning Advisory Service made 18 recommendations for change. These included creating a stronger and more resilient staffing structure, improved decision making and governance arrangements, communication and cultural improvements and a renewed focus on customer service.

The proposed improvements are being overseen by a corporate transformation programme. The work, which addresses all 18 PAS recommendations, as well as responding to staff and stakeholder feedback, is grouped around five themes, aspiring to create a Planning service that:

- 1 Has a strong workforce that embraces the council's values
- 2 Provides robust and transparent governance and decision making
- 3 Has a focus on effective place-shaping, delivering high quality sustainable development, unlocking housing and employment development;
- 4 Provides excellent customer service with a reputation for delivering quality outcomes;
- 5 Has efficient and innovative ways of working, embracing the digital agenda

The improvement plan includes a £1million injection of revenue which will be used to bring in at least 18 new members of staff at all levels and across all areas of planning activity. The council believes this is one of largest single authority investments in local government planning staff ever. The funding will kick-start a two-year improvement plan, to deliver faster decision-making, excellent customer service, and high-quality development.

Wiltshire Council became a unitary authority in 2009, bringing together 4 previous district councils and the former Wiltshire County Council into a single unitary area. It is a beautiful, rural county that covers 1,257 square miles, with a population of 510,300. It has one of the largest planning teams in the country, processing more than 6,000 planning applications and 1,000 enforcement complaints each year. It is producing one of the country's more complex local plans, planning for over 36,000 new homes by 2038 despite having some challenging constraints relating to rural transport infrastructure, world heritage sites, unusual ecological sensitivities, green belt and other landscape designations

People

Like most planning authorities, the team has faced many challenges with recruiting and retaining planning staff. A range of changes are proposed to transform this aspect, all based around a new team structure. A new panel has been set up to allow staff to be represented in the change programme. This will help shape changes like a new learning and development programme, looking to develop skills and improve organisational culture. A new career grade system has been developed to allow fast-track career progression.

It is recognised that more needs to be done to attract and retain the best staff. Work is being developed to attract school and higher education students to gain work experience in Wiltshire's planning service, the intention being they will be persuaded to start their career in the planning profession with us. Apprenticeship and graduate posts are being introduced and work is planned with local universities to provide practical experience working with Wiltshire's planning team.



Wiltshire’s planners are working flat out to meet challenging government targets. Nic Thomas, Wiltshire’s Director of Planning, says:

“Our staff handle huge caseloads. No sooner have they dealt with one urgent issue, they must turn their attention to the next crisis. They have no time to reflect and enjoy their successes. At Wiltshire, I want to create time and capacity for our talented officers to develop their skills and get back to enjoying being planners again. Developing a happy and motivated workforce is central to our improvement programme”



“At Wiltshire, we rely heavily upon our consultees for technical advice and support when making decisions on planning matters. For this reason, as part of our improvement plan, we have decided to invite the Planning Advisory Service to carry out a light-touch peer review of our ecology service. We hope this will lead to recommendations that will allow us to speed up this part of the process. Learning from this exercise will then be able to be rolled out for other consultees”

As part of the drive for improvement, the council is producing a learning and development program to equip planning staff with the latest skills to handle technical matters, secure high-quality design and to deliver exceptional customer service. Alongside this, they intend to increase engagement and training with stakeholders such as elected members, parish councils and consultees. Developing this collaborative working arrangement is all part of the plan to deliver the council’s ambitious growth agenda.

Process

Appointing additional staff is not the only dimension to the strategy. As part of its improvement plan, Wiltshire Council intends to carry out a full root and branch review of its internal planning processes. Colleagues from the council’s transformation team are being brought in to map out the way tasks are carried out and this will identify areas where time can be saved. The intention is that inefficiencies and duplication can be reduced, leading to better quality outcomes and more consistent decision making.

Place

One of the five themes of the council’s improvement programme relates to improved place-shaping. Proposals are being developed to drive up design and architectural quality of development, delivering improved public realm and environmental enhancements. This links with the council’s local plan aspirations for net-zero development and 20% biodiversity net gain.

A new partnership has been formed with Design West who will carry out independent design review of larger schemes. The idea is that the learning gained from this relationship will be rolled out to create a new internal design review process, equipping staff with the skills to be able to negotiate robustly with developers and reject poor quality.

The council has recently set up Place Boards for Wiltshire’s major urban areas. This provides corporate oversight and co-ordination into the future development of its main settlements. The Boards, chaired by senior officers, receive papers and verbal updates about existing and emerging projects, helping to provide a more joined up approach to delivering placed-based outcomes. Proposed changes will improve relations with developers and landowners and increase Wiltshire’s attractiveness for investment and growth.

Procedures

Wiltshire’s improvement programme will reform the way decisions are made on planning matters. Changes are underway to allow more efficient delegated decisions through internal team mentoring and checking of work and through the better use of templates and guidance for staff to improve the format and style of officer reports. In addition, work will take place later in the programme to look at the frequency of planning committee meetings and the way they are conducted, also interfacing with the Member education/training and support initiative. The intention is that this work will reduce the number of meetings that are cancelled, improve the quality of officer presentations and public speaking arrangements, and enable more effective and robust decision-making.

Partnership

Like most planning services across the country, changing internal processes and improving staff capacity needs to be undertaken mindful of internal and external relationships. Planning teams rely heavily upon internal and external consultees to deliver speedy and high-quality outcomes too. Councillor Nick Botterill is the council’s Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Development Management. He recognises the complex inter-relationship between planning services and consultees:



Performance

The proposed changes to Wiltshire’s planning service will take time to deliver. Completing the restructure and securing approval to invest £1million in additional staff is fantastic, but now the hard work starts. Organisational culture and attitude are critical to organisational and outcome success. A positive, constructive, inclusive, partnership approach with colleagues, which embraces respect and dignity, and recognises the challenges of change, will be central to the ultimate effectiveness of this programme.

Sally Canter, Head of Service for Planning Improvement feels the council is already well on its way:

“We have already made huge strides in our change programme, but improvement on this scale won’t happen overnight. We have a fantastic team who have lots of enthusiasm and ideas. We are also starting to receive lots of positive feedback from our customers. It will be amazing to be able to showcase our fantastic performance and customer service in years to come”.



Wiltshire’s Planning Improvement Programme is due to run until Autum 2025. For further details, **Contact** Sally Canter (sally.canter@wiltshire.gov.uk).

Author: Nic Thomas
Director - Planning, Wiltshire Council



04 MSc Planning dissertation summary report



Holly Johnston
(Planning Officer, Bromsgrove & Redditch Council)

Degree programme
MSc Planning

University
University of Plymouth

Dissertation title
Manning’s Pit vs Land to the East of Windsor Road: A case study of the effectiveness of public participation methods within the planning system (March 2024)

What was the planning issue and research question that you addressed in your dissertation research?

The aim of this research was to assess opportunities and barriers available to the public to participate in the planning process in order to protect places of local value using localism powers. The Localism Act of 2011 was introduced to, amongst other goals, give new rights and powers to local communities to increase their local decision-making powers within the planning system. These powers included the introduction of Neighbourhood Planning but also the community right to nominate locally important amenities to be listed as Assets of Community Value (ACVs). ACVs are given further protection from sale as there is then a Community Right to Bid for the asset if it is subsequently put up for sale.

A case study of Manning’s Pit, a green field site on the northern edge of Barnstaple in North Devon, was chosen to examine the strategies adopted by the public and the local action group ‘Friends of Manning’s Pit’ (FoMP) to protect the site from housing development between 2015 and 2021. The site is about 7 hectares

in size, comprising two fields of grassland bordered by hedgerows. To the south and west it borders housing while to the north and east it adjoins open countryside. In 2015 FoMP was formed in response to concerns that the fields were for sale to a developer. In 2017, a planning application was submitted for 41 dwellings by the new owner. Following objections from the Town Council and more than 250 letters of objection, the application was withdrawn in early 2018. Subsequently the site was listed as an Asset of Community Value following a campaign by FoMP in late 2018. The owner then put the site up for sale by auction in 2020 and in the summer of 2021 the site was finally purchased by FoMP under the Community Right to Bid.

The concept of ‘place-protective action’ (Manzo and Devine-Wright, 2014) was used to examine the place attachment of the local population to Manning’s Pit and how it may have changed as a result of the campaign to save it from development. Place attachment can be defined as the emotional bonds that people form with particular places. While these bonds are primarily experienced on an individual basis, place attachment can also be a shared experience through social activities (such as spending leisure time with family or friends). The research explored how a site can be viewed very differently by different actors within the planning process: as a valued place by the local population; as a potential development site by the local planning authority and as an investment asset by the development industry. Healey (2006) highlights how planning arguments, such as over land for housing, are often determined through reference to technical/ quantitative forms of evidence which carry more weight than more emotive forms of evidence such as place attachment.

The research objectives were, therefore, to 1) examine the local place attachment to the site; 2) analyse the effectiveness of participation approaches adopted by the local community to save the site from development and 3) reflect on any wider lessons that could be learned as to how local place attachment could be better recognised within the planning system.

04 MSc Planning dissertation summary report

How did you set about investigating this issue (methods and study area)?

A mixed-method approach was used in the research. Firstly, planning documents relating to Manning's Pit were examined to produce a timeline of the planning history of the site. To examine local place attachment to Manning's Pit an online survey was carried out of local residents, together with analysis of documents prepared by the local campaign group FoMP. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with key decision-makers, including three planning officers from North Devon and members of FoMP, to understand the use of localism powers by the community and their effectiveness in influencing the planning process. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify key themes.

What were your main findings?

A high level of individual and shared place attachment was identified, especially amongst residents living in the local vicinity of Manning's Pit. The attachment was linked to its natural beauty and the contribution it makes to the amenity of the local area as a place to exercise and walk dogs. Some respondents referred to memories of past experiences there, having grown up in the local area and played there as children. Not surprisingly, place attachment had increased as a response to the perceived threat of development and the FoMP's awareness-raising campaign. By successfully having Manning's Pit listed as an ACV, the site gained a stronger identity and recognition as a defined place which sent a strong message to the local planning authority and the developer about its local value. It became known as 'Manning's Pit' rather than the more anonymous planning description of 'Land to the East of Windsor Road'. However, being listed as an ACV does not guarantee protection in the long term unless the asset can also be purchased by the community (which they subsequently succeeded in doing). Members of FoMP were asked whether they had considered going down the Neighbourhood Planning route. They pointed out that it would not have been an effective course of action once the threat had emerged, given the time and resources required to prepare a neighbourhood plan. They were also focused on saving a particular site rather than on wider neighbourhood planning matters. While the planning application for Manning's Pit was submitted as a speculative application and the site had no formal planning designation, the 2018 North Devon and Torridge Local Plan (2011-2031) has drawn the settlement boundary of Barnstaple to exclude Manning's Pit which gives it protection from development in the future under policy ST06 (Spatial Development Strategy for Northern Devon's Sub-regional, Strategic and Main Centres). The exclusion reflects the successful campaign by FoMP as well as support from

a local councillor. This finding shows the importance in this case of having a settlement boundary and associated policy, together with the importance of support from local councillors.

What implications do your results have for planning practice and policy?

The research shows that communities who oppose proposed developments may be motivated by place-attachment emotions which are more complex than the term NIMBY implies. The example of Manning's Pit shows the challenges local communities face in making their views heard within the planning system to protect amenities that do not have formal environmental or heritage protections. The establishment of a local action group, in this case FoMP, required a large amount of resources and campaigning experience on the part of the group members which few communities could match. If there had been an opportunity for early engagement with the local community before the submission of the planning application, either by the developer or by the local planning authority, then the local place attachment to Manning's Pit might have been recognised as an important material consideration and might have enabled more constructive dialogue. There is also a lesson for local communities that they need to engage with the local planning authority at an early stage (e.g. plan-making stage) to ensure that their views are heard about valued sites, but that can be challenging, especially for less affluent communities. The opportunity through Neighbourhood Planning for communities to designate local green spaces would enable spaces like Manning's Pit to be protected, but neighbourhoods that do not have a neighbourhood plan, or where the local planning authority is unwilling to designate local green spaces as part of the Local Plan, are excluded from this option.

The research also shows that the ACV process is a complex and unwieldy tool for communities to use as a way to protect local amenities. To list an amenity as an ACV takes time and resources and the time allowed for the Community Right to Bid process (6 months) would be insufficient for most local groups to be able to raise sufficient funding. A longer period in which to bid would help local communities. In addition, owners should be obliged to accept offers from communities that meet the asking price. Without community ownership or a local green space designation, ACVs like Manning's Pit will remain vulnerable to development proposals. Now that Manning's Pit is owned by the local community as a green space there is a question over funding of on-going management of the site. The government needs to consider offering support to local communities for on-going management of locally owned assets (a finding that would relate to local green spaces as well as ACVs).



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<https://manningspit.com/>

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The Challenge

Swindon's Centre is in need of re-invention. Swindon continues to be one of Europe's fastest growing towns, and ranks well for productivity, innovation, and skills. Nevertheless, there are challenges present, and has a centre which require attention. New homes, cultural & leisure facilities, green spaces, and modern workspaces will all be needed to renew the Centre. A flagship project within this context is Kimmerfields. At over 10 hectares in area, this key regeneration scheme is of the scale needed to drive the re-invention of the wider Centre.

The History

Kimmerfields was allocated in the 2009 Swindon Central Area Action Plan for employment use. Outline planning permission was granted in 2012 for an office-led mixed use scheme. The LPA ensured implementation and deliverability was embedded within the development and application approach. In doing this, the LPA ensured that the development would

achieve key outcomes whilst also enabling flexibility in delivery. Importantly, this flexibility is not at the cost of quality; the place making parameters were fixed by the outline permission to ensure the outcome met the expectations and ambitions for the site. These included the requirement for the scheme to become an attractive gateway linking the rail station to the town centre and the need to enable the replacement of a dual carriageway that dissected Swindon Centre. The outline permission also provided for flexibility in the mix of uses and in the scheme layout. This has enabled the planning permission to remain relevant 12 years on, and has proven critical to implementation successes.

Subsequent to the Outline permission, the Council and partners proceeded to assemble the land needed to deliver a comprehensive scheme. The LPA took a leading role in the compulsory purchase of land that was not in public ownership. The original concept was for a scheme similar in layout to Brindley Place in Birmingham. However, changing market conditions ultimately made this this scheme undeliverable. A new approach was needed.

The New Plans

Shaped by community engagement, new plans have been developed for a genuinely mixed use scheme, with residential and civic uses complementing office use at the site. The aim is to create a new neighbourhood that will have vibrancy morning into evening, seven days a week. These new plans feature a large public green space at the heart of the scheme.

The first phase of the scheme, a new office for Zurich Insurance, has been delivered. The office is home to over 950 staff. This is a modern workspace designed to enhance staff wellbeing. One of the UK's most sustainable offices, the building features a storage and repair centre for bicycles, and is powered completely by renewable electricity. This scheme sets the tone for future phases.

In 2020 Swindon secured a 'Town Deal', which has funded the installation of access roads and services, and the carrying out of land remediation across the Kimmerfields site. This upfront enabling work has de-risked future phases, which can now come forward quickly. The Council is now working with a developer on plans for the delivery of a residential scheme as the next phase. The developer shares the Council's vision for Kimmerfields and, as a patient investor, will have a stake in Kimmerfields long term success. This long term view and partnership approach will ensure high quality place making and will maximise the scheme's social impact. The identity of the developer will be announced later in the year.

Mobility, connectivity, and place experience

Reworking the transport infrastructure and connectivity within central Swindon is an important part of a mobility strategy which supports and interfaces with Kimmerfields, and the wider aspirations for central Swindon. The Central Area Action Plan allocated a new pedestrian and cyclist route along the southern boundary of the Kimmerfields site. The aim of this new route was to fix a missing link in Central Swindon's cycle network. The route would also replace a stretch of dual carriage way which hampers pedestrian movement from the rail station into the town centre. In parallel with working up the Kimmerfields scheme, plans were prepared to replace the dual carriageway with a public realm scheme featuring an attractive pedestrian route and a continuous cycle route through the Centre. Government funding was secured to deliver this £33 million scheme. The identification of the route in the Central Area Action Plan helped the Council make the case for funding. Works are now underway. The dual carriage way has been removed. The replacement scheme is starting to take shape. The scheme will also accommodate a new bus interchange and provides extensive landscaping, including 173 trees and 23,000 plants.

This scheme is significant for Swindon Centre, and alongside Kimmerfields, will transform the experience for people living in and visiting the Centre.

A Proving Ground and driver for change

The large scale of change needed, combined with challenges of viability, means that the Council has had to take a leading role in proving the market for quality new development in Swindon Centre. Kimmerfields has provided this proving ground. The Zurich Insurance building is the first new office building built in Swindon Centre in 30 years. Similarly, the residential development coming forward in phase 2 will be the first major, new-build, residential scheme delivered in the Centre for over 20 years.

An objective of Kimmerfields is to stimulate quality private sector investment across the wider Centre. This objective is being achieved as new development comes forward on the land around Kimmerfields. The delivery of the Kimmerfields is a genuine 'game changer' for Swindon Centre; it is providing both an impetus and focal point for Swindon Centre's wider regeneration.

Author: David Dewart
 Head of Strategic Place Making at Swindon Borough Council



The DLUHC (now MHCLG) Digital Planning Programme has been supporting Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) through the funding for digital services to improve planning. Digital Planning has a vision of enabling a modern and efficient planning system in England, shifting a documents-based system to one that is data-driven, standards-based and powered by modern user-centred products and services. In Branchout this year we're going to be highlighting some the case studies, including some from the South West.

In the last issue we looked at the Plymouth, South Hams and West Devon Joint Local Plan. With the new Government stating that they will be incentivising 100% local plan coverage, in this issue we're looking at a case study from outside the South West, but one that will be increasingly relevant to LPAs as they update their policy frameworks.

The Project

In Round 2 of the fund, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) focused on the Lancaster West Neighbourhood Team as part of an estate-wide energy efficient refurbishment and engagement programme, aiming to provide support to over 2,000 residents with their housing needs, improving health and wellbeing, and access to employment and training. Previously, like many other councils, RBKC relied on in-person methods to engage local residents in their consultations. However, they identified that not only was this approach time-consuming, but they heard from residents that they were fatigued from the number of engagement letters and had in fact requested new methods.

To address this, they launched their pilot consultation, "Your Neighbourhood, Your Voice", which delivered a co-designed app and webpage to encourage Lancaster West residents to participate in the co-design of refurbishment, gardens on the estate, wider services, as well as a bespoke employment and training hub developing on the estate.

Their Approach

As part of RBKC's goals to make their consultation process more inclusive, they transformed their existing WeAreW11 app by adding new accessibility and translation functions. As well as this, the team worked with PingLocker and Built-ID to incorporate a number of additional functions, including:


- A calendar with all activities happening on the estate
- Accessible and gamified surveys embedded into the existing app
- Automated translation functionality into multiple languages
- Integration of an accessibility menu - for example a dyslexia friendly function
- A bespoke online survey, using geographical targeting and marketing through social media platforms.

Results

Through transforming the WeAreW11 app and adding new inclusive and accessible features, RBKC received 3,981 visits to the platform during the consultation period, and increased their online readership on Instagram from 829 to 6,716 reel views. The digital employment and training survey received 75 completions, and further profiled their online presence and accessibility. Through online promotion, they received over 200 attendees to their employment and training fair, 83 attendees to three in-person engagement events between September 2022 and February 2023, and were enabled to complete 207 co-design surveys across three projects.

Thanks to the Digital Team at MHCLG for allowing us to reproduce their case study here.

More case studies are available here:

 <https://media.localdigital.gov.uk/uploads/2023/11/28105757/PropTech-Innovation-Fund-Combined-case-studies.pdf>



"Your Neighbourhood, Your Voice"



Lessons Learned

Understand your residents' digital access

The RBKC team conducted a review of their residents' digital usage levels against the University of Liverpool's internet user classification system. This data was used to deliver dedicated digital inclusion initiatives, for example, providing residents with free data and devices to access the internet and further benefit from the services offered, including an employment and training hub, online booking systems and chat functions.

Understand the demographic of your audience

The team were able to engage broader audiences in their consultation by reflecting on the council's existing demographic information. This helped them to identify the most common languages spoken by their community and develop a translation function on the app to improve accessibility. The app currently translates into six languages.

Use community feedback to influence delivery

By working closely with residents from the Lancaster West Residents' Association and Built-ID, the team were able to use their digital platform to inform emerging designs and considerations for regeneration plans. For example, through the app, residents were able to express interest in a range of green skills, employment and training initiatives, as well as sustainability learning options. That data was used to inform and validate the development of an employment and training hub, working with eight local partners, as well as their inhouse Green Skills Academy

