

# Presidential Inauguration speech

22 January 2020

Hello everyone

The warmth of the welcome that I have been given today has been very moving and it means a lot to me – thank you all so much.

It is 106 years since the Institute was founded and 60 years since it was given its Royal Charter by Queen Elizabeth II. I am both humbled and honoured to be standing before you, wearing this very special chain of office on behalf of my profession.

It is also extremely heavy.

I am very pleased to be able to share this special day with everyone here, not least my close family, friends, colleagues, guests from sister Institutes and, through the power of social media, with RTPI members across our regions, nations and in over 80 different countries around the world.

Ian – you have been a super President and I would like to extend my thanks to you, on behalf of all the members of the RTPI, for everything that you have achieved throughout 2019 – you have truly delivered what you set out to do this time last year. As they say in the theatre – you will be a hard act to follow.

John – You have just reached the end of three years in the Presidential team and have continued to do so much for the Institute in your year as Immediate Past President. I know that everyone here will join me in thanking you as you step down from the team.

Wei – Welcome to the Presidential team. I am really looking forward to having you as Vice President and I thank you in advance for your support in 2020. ... its going to be a very busy year.

As the Corporate Strategy makes clear, we are One Institute. We have over 25,000 members worldwide, over 2000 of whom actively volunteer for the Institute in different ways.

I would like to thank each and every one of these volunteers for the time that they give freely and the work that they do in support of our profession. Thank you all.

The Institute is however more than just its members and I would like to thank the dedicated team of staff, led so ably by our Chief Executive Victoria Hills and also our Board of Trustees led by our Chair Sue Bridges.

My sincere thanks to you all for everything that you have done during the last year for the RTPI and, in anticipation of what I know you will be delivering in 2020.

Finally I would like to thank all those RTPI members who have provided me with the quotes and photographs that accompany this Inaugural Speech – they capture the essence of what planning and being a planner is all about.

### ***The Speech***

I know what drew me to the planning profession, but as part of being President I wanted to understand a little more about what it was that drew others to a career in planning – what makes it special – so I asked some planners.

The slide shows some of the responses that I received. There was a clear theme running through these responses – it is about place making and creating better places for people to live in.

As for what is special about planning as a profession, then the answers were more varied, ranging from the personal to the wider social impacts. The quotes on the slide reflect this.

A career in planning is, in my view and indeed the view of many planners, quite possibly one of the most important jobs that society can task anyone with.

I cannot think of many other professions where the decisions that we take, the policies that we put in place and the actions that follow, will have such a lasting influence on society, the environment and the quality of life for generations to come.

## **My personal journey**

I had never heard of planning as a career before I went to Sheffield University to study geography. But whilst there I attended a careers talk about planning, which left me buzzing, and in no doubt that this was what I wanted to do.

I applied to do planning as a postgraduate degree and accepted a place at Manchester University – where I met my good friends Ian Tant and Tony Bateman. Tony is also here today.

I have photos and stories that I could tell you about both of them – but that is perhaps best left for another day.

Instead the images on the slide are from a book which we were all advised to read – The Grotton Papers, published by the RTPI in 1979 and written by Stephen Ankers, David Kaiserman and Chris Shepley (who was later to become President of the RTPI).

The first page contained a message from the then President of the RTPI – who recalled meeting Sir Patrick Abercrombie (also a former RTPI President) and the advice that Sir Patrick gave to him, he said, in a deep and friendly voice ... *“Go and get on with your work”*.

Well that’s what I did and I started my career at Birmingham City Council.

Margaret Thatcher had just won the election and the challenges that we faced as a city were enormous. There were inner city riots – and no, in case you were wondering the bottom image on the slide is not from a recent episode of Peaky Blinders - and levels of unemployment that we would scarcely recognise today.

It was an interesting and somewhat unexpected first day – I had only been in post for three hours when the office walked out on strike (this was not, I was assured, a reaction to me joining).

I was unsure as to what I should do, but ended up spending a pleasant afternoon on an impromptu site visit with Simon Payne, who is also here

today, visiting parts of the city centre that were later to be transformed by the planners.

I have been privileged to have worked with many inspirational planners. In particular I would like to single out the late Graham Shaylor who was the City Planning Officer at Birmingham City Council from 1974 to 1990.

It was Graham who set up a city centre projects team in the early 1980s – and asked me to join it - to tackle the challenges that Birmingham faced and to take forward the redevelopment of the city centre,

breaking through the barriers of the 1960s concrete collar, masterplanning and delivering the International Convention Centre, for which I submitted the planning application, delivering the new Brindley Place and National Indoor Arena, together with a number of other major city centre projects. The quality and design of these spaces and the places that were created has had a lasting impact on my home city.

Ten enjoyable years followed teaching planning law and practice at the University of Central England (now Birmingham City University). During this time, I think I taught around 1500 students.

It is always very touching when former students contact me (as many have done over the past year) or come up to me at events to say hello; although their age and maturity is often somewhat disconcerting.

I would like to say today just how proud I am of them and so pleased that so many of them are now at the very top of our profession.

My time at the Advantage West Midlands, as Head of Planning and Transport equipped me well for the intricacies of working closely with government. Having lobbied Ministers and Treasury on behalf of planning, my region and all the English RDAs, attended Select Committee, sat on government steering groups and responded to White Papers - I know just what is coming in 2020 and how to get the best from the process.

I have also spent time in the private sector, firstly as the Midlands Planning, Policy and Economics Business leader with Arup and latterly as a Regional Director with Pegasus. Both roles provided me with a real understanding and a valuable insight into the range of different perspectives of planning, most notably from developers (large and small), landowners, house builders and infrastructure providers.

The two years that I spent as National Planner for the RTPI Planning Aid England was particularly rewarding. During that time I worked with government on the Planning Act 2008 National Policy Statement consultations, trained the then Infrastructure Planning Commissioners and other civil servants on what makes good engagement and lead authored the RTPIs Good Practice Guide on Engagement in Development Projects.

Most importantly I provided professional support and training for our 65 staff and 1500 volunteers. They were amazing people and I would like to thank them all for the work that they did, and that Planning Aid continues to do.

Throughout these seemingly different roles a clear and consistent theme has emerged – namely that good planning and meaningful engagement are inextricably linked.

Experience is however only part of the equation and as President of the RTPI in 2020 I know that I will have to draw on other life skills.

From a very early age – in fact 8 months – I had worked out that if you made an effort to reach out and engage with people, then you almost always got a good response.

The same has been true throughout my career and is very much true today. I have met some wonderful people as a result of this approach.

Equally, I am not afraid to learn new skills, to do things which challenge me in different ways and to live life in the fast lane.

As many of you know, especially if you read the recent article in The Planner, I enjoy spending my time leading groups of adults and young people in the mountains and hills of the UK and Europe.

Indeed it is the photograph in The Planner where I am stood, ice axe in hand, on a snow covered rocky ridge, that seems to have generated more interest than the article itself – where was it taken I keep being asked – well the answer is at a height of over 3,800m on the Cosmiques Arete on Mont Blanc.

My love of mountains is shared with many members of the RTPI – including Clive Harridge, Secretary General of the Commonwealth Association of Planners and another former RTPI President who has, I believe, also climbed the Cosmiques Arete.



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The RTPI West Midlands Region, for two years running, successfully completed the Water Aid Top 100 Mountains challenge – the second time being particularly notable due to the adverse weather conditions (high winds and heavy rain) which resulted in a number of other teams out there having to call out mountain rescue – we of course did not need their services!

As a UK qualified Mountain Leader, I also lead and assess expeditions for the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award Scheme and Scouting. These young people are acutely aware of their environment and the need to care for it and protect it.

### ***Moving on***

Enough of the past and enough of me – I now want to look forward to the future. A future that is important to us all.

As before, whilst I am clear about the role of planning in shaping the future of our places and spaces, I wanted to know what others thought.

A selection of their responses are shown on the slide.

As before a clear theme is evident, a theme that fully reflects my own views.

It is concern for the future of our environment and society and an acknowledgement that decisions taken today will have lasting impacts, the benefits of which may not always be evident to those alive today.

Planning is for and about people, the spaces and places that they use.

Planning matters - the legacy of the decisions that we take today will last for many generations and impact upon many lives.

For centuries society has made plans which have shaped its places and spaces. These plans have often been associated with ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is in place, from roads to support trading and the movement of people, through to public health, housing and the need for clean water.

Many of the issues that we face as planners today are not new.

Equally, concerns regarding the impact of new development or new infrastructure on spaces and places are not new. Planning matters to people, to their lives and to the lives of generations to come.

## **Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity**

Starting with the planners of the future, it is really important that as a profession we are reflective of society.

Whilst the gender balance of our membership is improving, women still only make up 39% of our members. BAME groups are similarly under-represented making up only 4% of our UK membership.

There is still a long way to go in terms of diversity.

Looking at the planning 'top table', it is not acceptable that women make up less than 20% of those in senior positions within our profession – I am sure that you will agree talent does not rest with one particular section of society, nor does the ability to plan for those who lead different lives.

Decisions taken within an 'echo chamber' will tend to reflect the views of those within that chamber. We feel good when others validate our views, we feel smarter when people tell us what we already know.

With complex issues, such as those tackled by planners, it is simply not possible for one person, or a group of people from similar backgrounds, to have all the relevant insights.

The success of the Code Breakers at Bletchley Park during World War Two was a reflection of the cognitive diversity of the team, with mathematicians such as Alan Turing and the former bank clerk Stanley Sedgwick - a crossword whizz who could put himself into the mindset of the code writers – both men brought different ways of thinking to code breaking. It is also worth noting that over 50% of those who worked at Bletchley Park were women.

Equality, diversity and inclusivity is more than an issue of morality and social justice, or box ticking, it is also about performance, innovation and success.

Equality, diversity and inclusivity matters.

Talent is everywhere – opportunity is not.

As a profession we need to do better if we are to truly understand, and respond to, the diverse needs of society for whom we plan.

As the 7<sup>th</sup> female President in 106 years I have taken on the role of Board Champion for Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity – something very close to my heart.

The Corporate Plan, which was launched earlier today contains, as one of its four pillars, the promotion of equality, diversity and inclusivity.

Work on an Action Plan which will set out how we can move forward on this, is now nearing completion. This Action Plan will initiate and deliver a series of projects and programmes which will help to equip RTPI members and the organisations that they work for, with actions they can take now, and in the future, to help us to improve equality, diversity and inclusivity at all levels across the profession. This action plan will be launched in the next few weeks!

### ***Community engagement***

50 years ago, the profession was set a challenge by Arthur Skeffington to improve community engagement. Skeffington believed that through proper engagement, public antagonism to planning and its manifestation in the process of objecting to new development, would fade away.

50 years on and the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission Interim Report found that there is “*falling public confidence in the engagement and planning process*”.

Opposition to new development is a fact of life across the world. This is because development impacts on people and their lives and people do not like change, especially if they feel that it has been imposed upon them.

The response to change is not always based upon logic, more likely it is based upon past experiences, perceptions of impact and place attachment.

People often see themselves as victims of development rather than welcoming the opportunities and benefits that it may bring for themselves and others.



As planners we work hard to engage. We know what good engagement looks like and feels like. But this takes time and resources to deliver. As a result, engagement often fails to reach out to the whole community.

How often do we hear from those who need new homes, who are living in overcrowded homes, unsuitable homes or who are homeless, when we are consulting on a new residential development?

And in the vast majority of cases, the views of younger people are missing – and in this context I mean the under 35s!

Anyone who has been struck by how differently younger people can think about old problems or how quickly they adapt to new technology, will realise that including them in the conversation about what is after all, their future, cannot be other than beneficial to everyone.

In fact it is a must.

How many times have planners engaging with local communities heard the words ‘we all think the same’ – well, back to the theme of diversity - that may be the case within that particular ‘echo chamber’ but it is rarely true of society as a whole.

Many people assume that other people live their lives much like they do – but this is often not the case – even within an individual family.

Our social networks are full of people with similar experiences, views and beliefs – as I mentioned earlier, it makes us feel good to have our own views echoed by others.

But as planners we are planning for everyone and we need to hear from all voices and not just those who shout the loudest.

When consulting on Local Plan policies we are asking people about the future of their areas. What could be more important? Yet typical response rates for Local Plan consultations are less than 1 in 10,000 of the population of the Plan area.

Whilst it is good to see that engagement in Neighbourhood Planning is much better, in the case of pre-application consultation, response rates are typically about 3% of those directly notified of an application – and are largely objection led, reflecting discrete geographic and demographic views.

What other business would make decisions on the future of a product or service based upon responses from such a small section of society?

The importance of equality, diversity and inclusivity extends beyond that of our own profession to encompass all those with whom we engage.

Even the best community engagement is not however always sunshine and rainbows.

I am well aware that many members of our profession, and indeed the communities with whom we are engaging, have been on the receiving end of bullying behaviour, intimidation, threats and damage to their property from those opposed to development.

And I have experienced first-hand the impact that this has on the mental health and wellbeing of colleagues and also members of the public who take a different view to the aggressors.

This is a sad reflection of the state of our society. It is not acceptable, and it has to stop.

Inviting people to be part of the conversation around the future of their places is one thing – convincing them that we will listen and exciting them enough to get involved is quite another – therein lies one of the biggest challenges that we face as a profession.

As planners we need to change the conversation around planning from the negative objection-led debate that we often see in response to new development, to a positive conversation where planning our future and ensuring that the places and spaces that we create are inclusive, happy and healthy ones and ones that we would like to see for our children and grandchildren.

When I talk to people about the future and the sort of place they want to live and work in, they are almost always very positive. Everyone has a view on it. They also recognise the importance of planning in delivering that future and creating places that work for everyone.

They recognise the challenges of change and also the speed of change – which is now in danger of outpacing the plan making process.

They see how digitalisation and the internet are rapidly and dramatically altering our working lives, our shopping behaviours, our social interactions and our access to services and education.

No-one has a crystal ball and none of us can foresee the future with certainty, but one thing is clear – we need policies that will not only help shape the present, but are sufficiently agile and flexible to respond to rapid change.

## **Climate change**

But perhaps the biggest challenge for us all is Climate Change.

Our oceans are now the hottest that they have been in human history, half of the volume of the sea ice that existed in the 1970s has been lost and the last decade has just been confirmed as the warmest on record.

Even with our current climate policies the world is heading for a temperature rise of more than 3 degrees by the end of the century.

Carbon emissions from human activities are the main cause of the sustained temperature rise, but as temperatures continue to rise, so efforts to limit this continue to falter, as science collides with politics.

The changes in global climate and biodiversity are amongst the most serious issues of our time and the built environment is a major contributor, accounting for almost 40% of energy related carbon dioxide emissions whilst also having a significant impact on our natural habitats.

There is no 'Planet B' and as Sir David Attenborough said last week "we are at the moment of crisis".

Events around the world are sharpening the understanding and appreciation of the risks of climate change - immense fires, hurricanes, floods and droughts.

Solar panels and meat free Fridays are not enough.

The time has come for big changes and meaningful action. There will need to be 'trade-offs' and difficult decisions – we cannot simply say that 'we want net zero' and then continue with a 'business as usual' approach.

It is easy to set targets; it is much more difficult to implement them.

As a profession we have a key part to play as we move into a decade of climate action and delivery.

As planners, our focus needs to be on more than limiting emissions to net zero by 2050 or sooner, it also needs to be on how our urban and rural areas can be equipped to adapt to the physical impacts and risks of climate change for the sake of future generations.

Our decisions will have a profound impact on future resilience and in turn the quality of life.

We know how the disruptive impacts of floods, coastal change, excessive heat and cold, affect the lives of ordinary people.

We also know that places that are more attractive to pedestrians and cyclists, where air quality is better and where public transport provision is good, will not only have lower carbon footprints, but will also be healthier and better places for people to live and move around in. It makes sense.

The need to make changes is increasingly understood by many developers, the private sector and funding organisations in terms of the investments in new development that they see as important and attractive.

As a profession we need to work with government and others to put in place actions and policies that focus on resilient environments, places where we can breathe clean air; this means not only better protection for existing places but also ensuring that future places are better adapted to respond to climate change.

Our success will be judged not just by those who are alive today, many of whom may consider that the changes needed will have an unacceptable impact on their way of life, but by future generations who will, as Greta Thunberg made clear in 2019, hold us to account

Climate Action is at the Heart of the RTPI Corporate Strategy 2020 – 2030. I am delighted that Ian Tant has taken on the role of Board Champion for Climate Action and will be representing the RTPI at the highest levels on this matter – thank you Ian. I know that you will have the support of all our Members.

## **Collaboration, strategic planning**

Across the country and indeed globally, planners are developing new ways of collaborating, sharing information and using technology to plan infrastructure in a more efficient and coordinated way.

The last decade has been one in which English regional and strategic planning has been dismantled. The government's plan to invest £100 billion to transform the UK's infrastructure and improve connectivity, along with commitments to the Northern Powerhouse, Midlands Engine and Western Gateway strategies are welcome.

However, as Michael Heseltine made clear, when launching Ambitions for the North – a spatial framework for people and places in the north of England - it is only through leadership, greater coordination and ambitious planning that the big, strategic challenges can be addressed, making sure that investment and growth works for everyone.

## **Housing**

Turning the housing challenge, this is not just about the present, it is also about the future.

The challenge of addressing a shortage of homes, especially affordable homes, to meet a growing and ageing population is something that planners across the world are facing.

But providing homes is about more than numbers. A home is more than bricks and mortar.

A home is also about the place where it is located, the social networks that exist, the green spaces around about, access to public transport, access to supporting facilities, education and healthcare.

A home should also be a place that is fit to live in.

In England 54,000 new homes have been delivered through permitted development conversions of former offices since 2015.

But many such conversions do not meet national space standards, with recent examples being as small as 10 square metres, some have no windows.



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Little regard is paid to design, location and the environment that surrounds these units, or the quality of the spaces and places in which they are located.

If that was not enough, research published last week by the Local Government Association suggests that communities have potentially lost out on 13,500 affordable homes in the past four years as a result of this form of permitted development. They have also lost out on the Community Infrastructure Levy contributions that fund the provision of local infrastructure.

The RTPI is lobbying hard and we will continue to lobby hard, to get this permitted development right removed. Scrapping this will give local planning authorities and local communities the ability to plan properly for the future of their areas and to ensure that new development is delivered to appropriate quality standards and with appropriate infrastructure in place.

## **Resources**

We all need the public sector to be properly resourced if the planning system is to be effective and to be in a position to respond to the many challenges we face.

Across England we have seen a reduction of 42% in real term funding of local authority planning teams since 2009/10 - with the West Midlands and North hit particularly hard.

Net expenditure per resident on planning is now 3 times higher in the south east of England (at £12.50 per person) than in the West Midlands, North East and North West, all of which average around £4 per person.

Cuts have also hit hard in the other UK nations. In Wales, planning services have seen budget cuts of 50 per cent over the last decade, whilst in Scotland the cost of the new Planning Act duties could reach £59 M – and this at a time when planning departments are already under severe financial pressures having lost a quarter of staff and 40% of their budgets over the last decade.

Whilst those teams impacted by these cuts have done an amazing job, this situation cannot be allowed continue.

The need for good planning matters everywhere; its value both today and in terms of our collective futures, cannot be underestimated.

Planners in all sectors need the ability to 'plan' and deliver resilient, well-designed places which are socially and environmentally sustainable.

Over the coming year the RTPI will be lobbying hard to ensure planning departments are properly resourced with Chartered Town Planners given the regulatory and policy tools they need to support delivery of the future that society expects and deserves.

### **Young planners**

The future of planning lies in our Young Planners – and their enthusiasm is infectious. What better career and profession could there be?

Last year saw the introduction of the RTPI Apprenticeship Scheme – a scheme which will undoubtedly help widen the diversity of our profession.

I am privileged to be teaching eight of the first year intake of apprentices at Birmingham University.

These apprentices are studying alongside another 60 or so post-graduate students – including around 20 who come from overseas – such is the value placed upon RTPI accredited planning education.

I was particularly touched by one student, Fan Wang from China who reflected on the session on community engagement in planning and took the time to get in contact with me over Christmas to share his thoughts.

The young planners that make up our profession are all so very committed, inspiring and confirmation of the fact that the future of planning will be in good hands.

We need to nurture, support and encourage all our young planners.

### **Conclusion**

So, by way of conclusion, we need an excited and supportive public where diverse voices and views are heard and valued, a diverse profession that better reflects the communities we serve, especially at senior levels, and valued and properly resourced planning teams.



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There is no doubt that we face challenging times – and I will be speaking out at every opportunity, in support of planners and planning, the value that we bring to society and the importance of our role not, just for those alive today, but for the generations that follow.

Over the coming year I hope to meet many of you as I travel around our nations, regions and globally, sharing the excitement and power of good planning.

I hope that you will also read about the things that I have been doing on the President's Blog as I take, with pride and confidence, the message about the importance and value of planning to politicians, the press, the public, the schools, colleges and universities.

I am sure that you will see from what I have said why I'm looking forward so much to my year as President of the RTPI 2020.

Thank you all so much for listening.