

Public Accounts Committee January 2020

Inquiry into the Effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities

1. How can local planning authority services become more resilient?

Planning services in Wales have seen budget cuts of more than 50 per cent over the last decade, leading to the stretching of planning officer capacity and a decrease in skills in key areas. Problems have been further exacerbated by a drop in the number of trainees entering the profession in the public sector.

A shift of planners from the public to private sector has seen far fewer planners working in the former. Recent RTPI research, drawing on Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures, estimated there are 22,000 planners in the UK. It also found that this period has also seen a major shift in where planners are employed. Until 2010 the public sector employed about 70% of all planners in the UK, however it is now around 55%. This indicates a likely drop of about 21% in the number of planners working in the public sector.

This shift is likely to be a direct result of austerity and many associated problems for local planning authorities. Local authorities will both lose the ability to fund the same amount of positions, and struggle to recruit to fill the ones they do have.

If this trend continues it could mean a fundamental reshaping of the profession. While half of architects used to work in the public sector the number is now closer to 3%. Recent research has highlighted some of the potential issues with this shift, however, ultimately we cannot know the full range of implications.

The RTPI undertook research to explore public and private sector planners' experiences of how local planning service delivery is changing, and what these changes mean for the planning system's ability to deliver in the public interest.

It finds that LPAs have had to adapt to survive in this environment, often adopting private sector working practices and aggressively pro-development stances to draw in the funding they need to resource their planning teams. But, while LPAs are increasingly acting like the private sector, and the private sector continues to be seen as an indispensable and legitimate source of the expertise and capacity they need, there are signs of a growing backlash against the partial outsourcing that has proliferated in recent years, particularly in England. While full outsourcing has always been rare, and only occurred in England, this appears to be part of growing dissatisfaction with the practice in general across the local public sector. Our participants pointed to higher long-term costs, weaker relationships with applicants, and greater staff 'churn' as some of the reasons for this rising scepticism within planning.

This is not to say that LPAs no longer outsource key areas of their work, or that they will not do so in the future; there are strong forces that continue to drive both of these things.

The concept of 'balance' –weighing up different considerations, interests, and requirements – remains central to the way both public and private sector planners in the UK execute the public interest. In many ways, little has changed in the toolkit they use to carry out this balancing: professional expertise; accreditation; and continuing development remain central to their decision-making and credibility. However, 'proceduralism' – in other words, a box-ticking culture – has closed down a lot of the space planners traditionally had for reflection, professional discretion, and proactive planning. In so doing, this is making it harder to undertake the kind of long-term strategic thinking many equate with delivering the public interest.

There are certainly exceptions. Large, transformative projects can carve out spaces that make this possible. But these cases go against the grain, and opportunities like these were seen as disproportionately concentrated in large urban authorities that experience high development demand.

Strong, experienced, local planning leadership could also make a difference by ensuring strategic oversight, institutional memory, and smart commissioning. In the process, effective leaders with a good knowledge of planning maintain and make the case for efficient, in-house planning services. We hear many examples of effective leadership and case studies of inspirational change, however more often reported were the challenges LPAs face in recruiting experienced leaders. Austerity and restructuring has led to a lack of experienced senior planners in the public sector, and consultancies offer an enticing, well-regarded, well-paying alternative to a public sector that is commonly regarded by planners as having image problems.

The current picture of local planning service delivery in the UK is not a universally gloomy one, but it does raise serious questions. These questions are not necessarily the same across the UK, and indeed, planners in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland remained more optimistic than their English counterparts. The study did however find a prevailing sense that local authority planners currently face huge challenges to their ability to plan effectively in the public interest.

We need to look beyond patching up the holes that have been created by cuts, to see public funding of planning as an investment in delivering the land use we need to deliver the social, environmental, economic and cultural outcomes we aspire to. To deliver this we need more resources for planning, and broad new investment in place to bring in more place-based professionals across the board.

Planning can be an efficient way of using public investment to deliver social, economic and environmental value. Rather than look at planning as a way of facilitating development as cheaply as possible we need to explore what the optimum level of support is to achieve a broad range of outcomes in an efficient way.

Furthermore there is an obvious financial case for local authorities investing in planning. Planning fees and other income from development management are just a small part of the story. Planning and placemaking can also raise income by developing new industrial and employment space, which comes with increased business rates. It can make a place more attractive to visit which brings income to the local economy. And it can help provide new homes in places people want to live, which brings in more council tax.

Increased investment in planning would go a long way towards improving the functioning of LPAs, however more will be needed to make local authorities an attractive place to work and help counter the shift to the private sector.

A key benefit of increasing resourcing would be to free up enough capacity to enable local authorities to release planners for training. At the moment many local authority planners struggle to get a day away from the office to take part in training sessions. This is especially important given it will be difficult to deliver a major increase in the number of local authority planners in the short term.

We also need to restore the corporate power of planning within local authorities. Our research on Chief Planning Officers has shown both how few Welsh local authorities have a planner at the top table, and the wide range of benefits that can be achieved through having one there. We should follow Scotland's lead in legislating for mandatory Chief Planning Officers in every local authority.

New technology may also offer opportunities for improving the working lives of planners. RTPI is currently working with the Connected Places Catapult to explore how technology can free up planners time to work on proactive planning.

2. How can timeliness and decision making on planning applications be improved?

It is not just with LPAs where there are staff shortages and a lack of skills. The statutory consultees markedly affect the timeliness and decision making by a LPA. These include NRW, Highways Authorities for example.

The quality of submissions should also be considered. If a submission is not complete or the supporting information is lacking, then this can affect the length of time taken for an application to be determined.

3. How can local planning authorities improve the positive community impact of their work?

Too often community participation is not resourced as a key part of the planning process. As with planning policy, rich community engagement can seem like an unaffordable and time consuming burden to overstretched local authorities. Benefits of greater resourcing for participation would include greater social cohesion, greater trust in government, and a closer link between communities and land use.

4. How can local planning authorities deliver the aspirations of the WFG Act and help improve Well-being?

The justification for increasing investment in planning services is clear: (1) the current level of resourcing is unsustainable, especially if we want to deliver increased numbers of quality homes; (2) planning is an efficient way to deliver a broad range of social, environmental and economic goals, (3) it is an investment which will bring not only social return, but increased tax revenue for local authorities by bringing people and economic activity into areas and by reducing social costs.

Spending on planning is a very small part of total public spending, which means relatively major increases in resourcing could be made with little overall impact on budgets. Moreover these investments would deliver huge returns – rather than being forced to rely on generating more fees, LPAs could help deliver social, environmental and economic outcomes which make society more resilient, happier and fairer.

4th February 2020