

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO THE RTPI ANNUAL CONVENTION CARDIFF 2003

**By
Vincent Goodstadt**

Thank you.

It gives me great pleasure to open this Convention.

This is a historic year for the Royal Town Planning Institute. After years of talk its members have committed themselves to a New Vision for planning.

By an overwhelming majority, 82%, the profession has agreed a new constitution

- which reflects the true width of our skills and tasks;
- which allows us to be more effectively manage; and
- which embraces all who want to take up our cause to improve the quality of life of all communities both urban and rural.

This commitment to change has been made possible by the genuine sense of common purpose shown by the management of the Institute – both members and officers. In particular I want to pay a personal tribute to Jim Amos who died so suddenly a month ago at the age of 78, and showed more hunger for change than many half his age; he is greatly missed.

His commitment to change was driven by a desire to continue to promote the art and science of town planning for the benefit of the public.

This commitment to change has also been necessary because of the challenges we face today, both here and abroad, in delivering an effective and caring planning service are experienced.

I was particularly struck at the American Planning Association conference earlier this year which highlighted our common cause in tackling the problems arising from the paradox of economic globalisation and growing political regionalism in the face of growing individualism. These forces combine to challenge collective action that underpins planning and which at worst find expression in racism and terrorism. It is essential therefore that the renewed RTPI works closer with our international planning colleagues. Therefore, I am delighted that Mary Kay Peck, President of the APA, Barbara Norman from the Australian Institute and others are here and participating.

PRINCIPLES

The New Vision of planning has been included in your conference material, is based on 4 qualities of planning, - that it should be

Spatial
Sustainable

Integrated
Inclusive

The risk is that these FOUR concepts will become meaningless Mantras.

We need to translate these ideals into a programme of action. Therefore, I would like to consider briefly each of these concepts in turn.

SPATIAL PLANNING

Let me turn first to the concept of spatial planning which is now built into the heart of our charter and into government legislation. Despite this and its embodiment in the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), some have criticised the term as being undefined or indefinable. Let me therefore take a few moments to dwell upon it.

To start with let me reassure the innocent among you that it has nothing to do with Star Trek. At its heart spatial planning is concerned with the interdependence of communities (whether neighbourhoods or nations). This requires us to be more rigorous in our understanding of the areas within which people search for houses and jobs, or shop and play - as well as natural watersheds and river catchments. This requires us to recognise that political administrative boundaries do not reflect people's real community of interest. Spatial planning also requires that the growing plethora of statutory 'plans and strategies' (e.g. for housing, health, transport) being produced by an increasing wide number of agencies to be clearly integrated in terms of their effect on individual communities.

The lack of effective spatial planning contributes to the great inequalities in our society. The regional economic disparities within the UK are resulting in a new wave housing clearance in the north. This exacerbates the pressure for growth, particularly in the South East where 1m homes are now required in the next 15 years. These homes are however unlikely to be provided

- whilst major new housing development is associated in people's minds with urban conditions, in terms of crime, education and particularly transport, and
- that themselves reinforce the flight from the city and the search for the rural idyll.

Spatial planning however is not just concerned with the location of development but also with the quality of urban design. Urban design must be seen as more than an issue of aesthetics and architectural style but as critical in terms of its impact on well-being, crime or health. This is captured better by the reference to 'urbanism' rather than 'urban design'.

The promotion of the principles of 'urban design, which CABI is taking such a lead on, is applauded. Despite this I am concerned that we do not have the depth of professional skills to translate emerging good practice into action for all communities.

I fear that a formulaic approach to urban design for 'sustainable communities' will become the norm in terms of fashions of densities, layout and 'styles' in which communities are just as polarized and car dependent as at present.

I however want to highlight two implications of this new focus on spatial planning.

Firstly, the introduction in England of statutory Regional Spatial Strategies is welcomed. However, if there is to be sufficient focus on economic, social and transport problems of the core cities sub regional plans for the city regions should be a requirement of the new system.

Secondly if the Treasury are concerned to identify where the greatest planning impediments are to our economic competitiveness, they need to look no further than our lack of a UK wide spatial planning framework. Without it there is no clear view of the relative role of each region. Without it there is no confidence about future infrastructure networks upon which economic investment relies. Without it the economy will underperform internationally, divisions in society will increase and the environment will continue to be eroded unnecessarily.

SUSTAINABILITY AND PLANNING

This leads me to the question of sustainability in planning.

We all brand our plans and policies as sustainable - integrating social, economic and environmental objectives –triple bottom lining. For some projects, this may be the true - like some of the Waterfront developments where we have managed to combine economic growth with the recycling of brownfield land, linked to public transport systems and accessible to those who most need a job.

The truth however is that references to sustainable development are often simply rhetoric, and as a result we are not facing up to the conflicts between economic, social and environmental objectives.

Let me examine some aspects of the current policy conflicts

The conflicts between Economic and Environmental Change are well documented with mutual distrust between investors and environmentalist. The growing environmental agenda is seen as a burden by business. However, the prospect of new short-term jobs generally results in the cherry picking of sites with high road access and amenity and thereby fuelling urban sprawl.

This challenge between short term economic and long term environmental objectives is reinforced by the tension between Economic and Social Change. The Rowntree Foundation highlighted, last year, that the areas of economic growth are having difficulty of recruiting essential staff and increasing long distance commuting involving

"unacceptable personal & social consequences for families". Housing is becoming "unaffordable"; communities are becoming more divided and less sustainable.

In contrast Social and Environmental objectives, in theory, should raise no conflict. Household surveys show us consistently that people place environmental issues high up the agenda of social concerns. In reality the rise of consumerism is inexorably driving the demand for more houses, shops and cars. It has been suggested that as a result the rate of urbanisation in the UK during the next 50 years will be even greater than we have experienced since the 1950s with a 45 % increase in the urbanised area. What future for sustainable communities in this context?

We therefore need to challenge the rhetoric of sustainability and be prepared to say when the 'Emperor is Naked'. The development pressures we manage are market-driven not plan led.

The problem is that much of what is required to build sustainable communities is 'beyond our control' – goalposts have to be moved if we are to make progress.

To do so we first of all need to be honest about the limitations of many of the existing criteria-based policies, ad hoc environmental assessments or the screeds of sustainable indicators. They are too often selective (not integrating social and economic factors), reactive (not plan led), or incremental (failing to deal adequately with the cumulative impact of change).

We must also decode the rhetoric of sustainable development (for example the precautionary principle, the wise use of resources, carrying capacity, ecological footprint and the polluter pays). We must translate them into practical planning concepts, challenging current practice where necessary.

For example, we must challenge the use of trend-led forecasts of air transport or regional housing needs; We must question whether the use of discount rates which write off the future value of new public infrastructure projects consistent with sustainability; we must ask whether a presumption in favour of development consistent with the need to set limits on the demand for development.

The RTPI has therefore set up a SD Think Tank which I hope will start a debate about a more honest approach to SD policies.

INTEGRATED PLANNING

This leads me to the need for a more integrated approach to planning. We need to link the development plans to other strategies and to the means of implementation. Without this, the plan-led development system will continue to be focused on regulation as the only direct power that a planning authority has.

Currently there are too many plans (RES, RSS, LTS, RTS, RHS, LBAP, RHS, LHS, WFD, Community Plans etc). Too many of these are also criteria based without vision which makes integration a black art.

I believe that the way forward must lie within a change in the culture not just of planning but for planning based on a genuine commitment by all parties to a common perspective of change and priorities. The issue of a more integrated approach to planning however has to be seen in the same light as the challenge to deliver a more inclusive approach to planning.

INCLUSIVE PLANNING

Public participation has been one of the defining characteristics of the British planning system for nearly 40 years. I remember being reassured in the 1970s by planners from Portugal and Poland that if they consulted people like we did they would be imprisoned for subverting the government. We have however reached a stage when there are three mutual reinforcing countervailing trends.

The first is the dramatic drop of involvement in all aspects of community activity, especially among young people, except where single issue politics arise, dominating and distorting consultative processes.

The second is the increasing complexity of government where there is no clarity of where responsibility lies, which reinforces the sense of tokenism associated with participation processes.

The third trend is the scale of consultation overload that is growing exponentially with electronic communication. For members of the public this is becoming excessive and for organisations there are real costs of being involved in the planning process involvement.

In truth we are faced with a growing gap between power and responsibility at all levels and in all sectors of society. There is a growing democratic deficit.

Appointed agencies have increasing capacity through their corporate decisions to determine the future of communities. They should be subject to the same standards of public accountability. The removal of Crown Immunity from planning control is therefore welcomed. If however public agencies want to be true stakeholders in a plan-led system then they must make a tangible commitment to its implementation and not just to involvement in its processes. For example, conformity with the development plan should be a condition of entry for government funding for all agencies.

In contrast local communities are expected to act as partners or consultees on an increasing number of strategies yet they have limited say if these plans are subsequently undermined by ad hoc decisions. Why is this acceptable? Should not individuals and communities have a right to know that plans will not be subject to significant change by ad hoc decisions on applications without their having the same say as they had in the preparation of the Plan? – i.e. a right to an independent hearing.

There are also real challenges for the private sector to participate as 'stakeholders' in the planning process whilst protecting the market interests of individual companies.

I suggest three simple changes - you may have other ones :

- at the plan preparation stage, the public agencies and key development interests should set out their position in advance of wider public consultation to enable local community interests to see whether 'government is joined up'.
- when a plan is approved or adopted the programmes and policies of government agencies should be formally linked to those set out in the plan in some form of accord, comparable to the ERDF funding requirements;
- third party rights should be introduced on new proposals that have not been tested in the plan and is so significant that it needs to be referred to Ministers of State.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HOUSING

Let me try now and draw together some of the implications that all this might have for housing policy.

We need to recognise that this country has failed, and is increasing failing, to deliver an effective housing policy. The depth of this failure is demonstrated by a few facts.

- There is a current shortfall of at least 26% between the amount of new housing we need and the amount we are building
- South of a line from the Humber to the Wash, households are projected to increase by about 105K each year but in 2001/02 only 67K homes were completed.
- At a time when the number of households in temporary accommodation is at an all-time high, under 15,000 social rented houses were completed last year – which on some estimates is an 82% shortfall of what is required
- Because of the low completion rates the brownfield completion rates are exaggerated Although 64% of new homes are on brownfield sites this is 20% less than was actually needed to achieve the original brownfield targets of the Government

The Government's recognition of these issues and its Sustainable Communities initiative to tackle them are welcomed.

The failings in housing policy however are too often placed at the feet of the 'planner' more than any other policy area for not having provided an adequate supply of marketable housing land. On its own the provision of land in 'preferred' new

development areas (e.g. the Thames Gateway) is not sufficient. Whilst in the areas of low demand (e.g. the Pathfinder areas) housing action in the areas of greatest need like Burnley and Nelson will not succeed unless there is a national economic strategy which achieves as opposed to just aspiring economic growth in the North West region compared with the south east of England.

I would however like to touch on three specific housing issues

- Affordable housing
- Delivering social and physical infrastructure
- The quality of housing.

Central to much of the debate is the need for clarity and credibility in the plans for providing affordable housing. The money available for social housing is now 30% lower in absolute terms than was being spent in real terms in the mid 1990's. Yet S106 agreements currently only deliver 12,000 affordable houses a year.

There is therefore currently great confusion about where and when affordable housing should be provided through developer contribution or with social housing grant from the Housing Corporation. This makes the development process slower and more uncertain than it should be.

In addition, affordable housing becomes unaffordable housing if the necessary employment opportunities and community facilities are not accessible through efficient and affordable networks of public transport.

This leads me to the second area concern. There needs to be integrated implementation programmes for housing. These should be expressed as prioritised programmes of land acquisition, decontamination, infrastructure provision, private development and community facilities. Within this there should be defined roles for existing bodies such as local authorities, English Partnerships, regional assemblies and RDAs and whatever new agencies may be necessary, including the Regional Housing Boards.

It is crucial that implementation programmes include an integrated programme for the strategic infrastructure – roads, rails, water, sewerage, electricity, telecoms which is not dependent on S106 contributions. The private sector needs to know, and to believe, what is intended to happen and when.

Finally, we must also address the issue of urban form and quality.

There needs to be a frank recognition that we start from a low base of public confidence about the quality of what will be built. In this context the search for higher residential densities in the growth areas raises real issues. For example, higher densities we all agree should be associated with public transport nodes – but that requires that public transport should actually service those nodes.

In areas of low demand, it necessary for us to recognise that

- the Pathfinder initiatives only address half the areas under stress; the regional strategies must tackle the problems across the board with equal vigour
- the problem of abandoned housing is as much a problem of too few houses of the right type forcing people to look for houses in the wider region rather than one simply of surplus housing;
- we also need a proper debate about the balance between clearance and renewal now rather than after the event if we are to avoid the mistakes of the sixties.

Housing is a basic human need and it is an indictment of this country that we cannot house all the people in decent, affordable, accessible and high-quality housing. Planning has a vital and positive role in helping to achieve this. The RTPI must now place planning for housing at the top of its list of policy priorities. As a clear demonstration of this new emphasis, I am today launching " – a statement produced jointly with the Chartered Institute of Planning.

I am pleased to know that the CIH is launching this document simultaneously today at their national conference in Harrogate. This joint statement sets an agenda for both professions and for all those who are concerned with – or about – housing. The RTPI will be focusing on a number of issues in the coming year with the intention of making a real impact on the ways in which planning deals with housing. Thus, a campaign would call for:

- a radical review of our approach to planning gain involving
 - o recognizing that planning gain is not alone the way to fund housing for the those in need - there should be a properly resourced national programme of doing so
 - o an open book approach to negotiations - i.e. the developer showing all the financial information re. a scheme so that the planning gain contribution can be properly assessed
 - o local discretion over thresholds (the size of site/development below which gain agreements cannot be negotiated)
 - o more innovative use of sec. 106 revenue (e.g. to fund empty property strategies) and
- spatial strategies
 - o based on sub regional analysis which relate to real housing market areas
 - o which set a framework for affordable housing and
 - o integrate strategies by agency and in policies and programmes

VALUES OF PLANNING

I want to reflect on the fact that like all professionals we are entrusted to work with 'dangerous mechanisms' - the safety of our communities is just as much in our hands as the doctor or engineer. The decisions we take about the future of our towns and cities can damage people's well-being and health literally, just as much as they can cure their ailments.

The Government's initiative to address the culture of planning is therefore welcomed. In doing so it needs to move away once and for all from the preoccupation with speed and economy that too often put forward as the main tests of effectiveness and quality of a planning service.

The Institute has therefore taken the lead in seeking to raise standards. The major review of education that we are undertaking is critical to renewing our commitment to these professional standards. We also need to extend our approach to mentoring of organisations and not just individuals since the culture of planning is being set within the management of councils, companies and agencies rather than by individual professionals.

In the final analysis we have a duty of care not only to our clients but also to the common good by protecting people from quack remedies however fashionable and the sided effects of any prescription we offer to ills that communities face.

The current prospects for society are for greater public costs, continued inequalities and an increasingly impoverished environment. Despite the cynicism that often prevails, planning however does make a major contribution to the well-being of society; This is most publicly demonstrated annually by the RTPI Awards which celebrate what planners, when enabled, can achieve under remarkably diverse circumstances and enormous constraints. Many of you here today at this Convention, are at the frontline of this battle to change society for the better.

The Institute is therefore committed to leading a threefold challenge: -

- we will challenge the unacceptable trends that are dividing communities whether in wealth, health, housing or fear

- we will challenge the inappropriate policies which are currently resulting in unsustainable development

- we will challenge the ineffective processes which impede change required to deliver a fair, prosperous and sustainable future for all communities.

If we do not meet these challenges we face continuing urban sprawl, growing congestion, and an increasingly polarised society. This is reflected in the scope of the subject matters and speakers that we have brought together for you in this Convention.

Planning has the capacity for change and to provide confidence for those who invest in new development as well as those who are impacted by it.

The current momentum for change within planning must be sustained,

Thank you