

MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP FOR
ARCHITECTURE + THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT NORTHERN IRELAND

SYMPOSIUM – Planning for Places

Armagh, 7 September 2010

Report of Chairperson – Jean Forbes BA, MSc, MEd, Dip TP, MRTPI ret, FRSGS

Introduction

I found it a privilege to chair this symposium. The range of expert speakers and the thoughtfulness of all participants added up to a very positive experience.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT

A time of change

We are at a crucial time in Northern Ireland because we have the opportunity to reform both the Planning system **and** the Local Government system at the same time. Any new Planning system must slot into a system of governance, which gives it statutory force.

It was valuable to hear from the DoE that a re-design of the planning system is progressing well and bringing a gradual clarification to the hierarchy of Technical Planning tasks. The key to this clarification will be the reported “devolution” of a “suite of plans” to the new councils. This is to be welcomed, in light of the number of separate Departments currently doing bits of what we would call Spatial Planning.

Jim Thompson of Planning Service presented 'Place Making in the Planning Process' reflecting the shortcomings in the existing Area Plan process including inadequate public participation and meaningful engagement, together with objectives for new local development plans including a key proposal to produce a 'statement of community involvement' with more effective participation from the public early in plan preparation - at the stage of a preferred options paper.

Using the opportunity

Viewing the amended programme as an opportunity, we ranged widely over the improvements which we thought were going to be needed to both systems, in order to achieve the highest **quality** Planning for Places, starting from the principles of Sustainable Development – accommodating our social and economic needs harmoniously within our environment.

THEMES

Several key themes kept recurring, some examples being:

- people and their “involvement” or lack of it, (“people make places”);

- "communities" and how to define them;
- finding and securing the "essence" of places;
- the need for both Plan making and Implementation to include all aspects of the relevant places, (sometimes called "joined-upness");
- the importance of conservation in all its forms.

LOOKING FOR THE COMMON THREAD

From my personal career experience in Scotland, I have the firm belief that Public Participation must be made a statutory requirement upon planning authorities (reference *the Town and Country Planning Scotland Act 1972*, which transformed the whole style and practice of Spatial Planning there.

From the Chair I had opened the proceedings by presenting my view that there are different geographic scale levels of planning work and each must be matched by an appropriate structure for public participation. (See Chairperson's Introduction as presented at the Symposium.)

I kept the idea of these two interlocking structures in mind throughout the day to help my own understanding of how much work on these themes has already taken place in Northern Ireland, but **I detected few signs that, at official level, the urgent need to get Participation into the legislation is understood, never mind being pursued. The good work on the ground still needs an overarching structure which will focus participation into the practice of Planning.**

Understanding participation

We were fortunate to be meeting in Navan, Armagh, one of the most ancient settlements in Ireland. Armagh is held in great affection by the people of both the city and the surrounding countryside. The Mayor, Councillor Jim Speers MBE, gave us an understanding of these qualities in describing his own esteem for his home city and his commitment to its welfare.

With the historic place all around us, literally and metaphorically, several speakers drew attention to the importance of place AND of learning about the places from local people. Early on, the phrase "the essence of a place" came up, and it was used several times thereafter. Kathy MacEwan told us how the people of Tower Hamlets defined their "areas of belonging". John Briggs (again of Armagh) said that councils had to understand the essence of places and take a firm stand against anything which would have a negative effect on this.

Trevor Osborne describing his design work on the public building of Armagh Gaol, reported the huge interest from local people in inspecting his ideas on site.

Right at the end of the meeting Emily Smyth reminded us that essence comprises both tangible measurable things and intangibles, which only

local people can tell us about. Armagh has surely more intangibles than most places so it was a good place to learn this truth.

Territories for organizing the work

While the region and the council level territorial boundaries will be given and generally understood, there were a number of different kinds of territorial "boxes" discussed at the Symposium within which participation might be developed at the more homely scales where people live.

Belfast City Council's series of areas – "City Places" – compiles data across a number of fields, to ensure efficient delivery of key services in line with demonstrated need. This system is data orientated and tends to combine several identifiable, named places into statutory groupings without names (just W1, N2, etc, like old London Postal Districts) which are not used by local people and do not relate to local people.

The Tower Hamlets "self defined" areas of "belonging" were very interesting and seemed to be robust in winning the loyalty of local people.

Peter Carr raised the possibilities of Wards being used. The problem might be that the ward boundaries are drawn to equalize electorates and whilst they have names, they may have little "sense of belonging" encoded within them.

Although not discussed in detail, mention was made of the Scottish Community Councils. These have been part of the local administrative structure since 1973. They are self defined and vary enormously in geographic and population size. There are approximately 1,200 community councils, which can be housing estates of 30,000 people, or small local areas of a few hundred.

Places of "town size" are obvious units since people clearly "belong" to them and will say so. Within our larger urban areas like Belfast and Derry, city sectors, urban neighbourhoods or "urban villages" may be the best size of units. (Think of the "belonging" in Ballymacarrett, Knock, Shankill, Cliftonville, Malone, etc.)

The common guiding principle however must be the people's own definition of area of belonging.

HOW FAR DID WE GET AT THE SYMPOSIUM?

It is clear that the principle of public involvement is accepted and applied in various ways by many individual professionals and community orientated groups.

BUT

There was no sign from the official level that there is understanding of just how important the principle of participation is to 21st century good practice, not just in Planning but in the field of governance generally. The levels of scale at which people can get truly involved in the Planning process are precisely those at which there is now absolutely NO framework for participation.

I repeat that consultation is not participation.

We did not have any discussion of the most local level of all – the site level – which was noted by Professor Barrie Todd in his summing up when he called for three dimensional considerations to be of great importance in planning.

RESOLUTION OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Is indicative of the support from the symposium for the idea of better citizen involvement, that the meeting passed the following resolution at the close of business on 7th September:

Resolution

1. This Symposium calls upon the Ministerial Advisory Group (the MAG) to advise the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure that it is timely to request that the Minister for the Environment should now prepare the “statement of community involvement” as specified in the Planning Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 Article 3A.”

This call takes note of the recent amendment to the programme for the implementation of the Review of Public Administration and Planning Reform;

and further,

2. This Symposium calls upon the Ministerial Advisory Group (the MAG) to assist the Department of the Environment in the preparation of the “statement of community involvement”.

In so doing, the MAG would be assisting the Department to give effect to :

the Architecture and Built Environment Policy, Objective 1: “Through productive engagement it is more likely that good design, which addresses the concerns of local people, will result.”

and the recommendation of the Report from the Public

Examination of the Regional Development Strategy, 1999,
Appendix 3

that "participation at the Local level (the level of the town or subject plans)..... has the ability to respond with great positive energy, if brought into the process at the earliest possible stage and kept going throughout".

The Planning Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2006

- **2006 No. 1252 (N.I. 7)**
- **PART II**
- **Section 3**

"Statement of community involvement

3A.—(1) *The Department shall prepare a statement of community involvement.*

(2) The statement of community involvement is a statement of the Department's policy as to the involvement in the exercise of the Department's functions under Article 4 and Part IV of persons who appear to the Department to have an interest in matters relating to development in the area in which they live."

The Statement of Community Involvement is defined as above. The Symposium understands this to mean that a structure is to be put in place for continuous public participation (not consultation) in Planning. This aims to facilitate the achievement of the maintenance, management, design and planning of places which are highly valued by local people and visitors.

Jean Forbes BA, MSc, MEd, Dip TP, MRTPI ret, FRSGS

Chairperson of the Symposium,

Planning for Places,

Navan, Armagh,

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