

SSN article for The Planner

Sustainable development is a key objective of the Scottish Planning System. This seemingly innocuous statement – soon to be enshrined in statute (assuming the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill proceeds as expected) - evokes responses of all extremes in planning professionals. Differences of opinion notwithstanding, the establishment of ‘the S word’ as a statutory responsibility demands that all involved in the planning system come together to address some pressing questions. Primarily, it requires us to move beyond fine aspirational statements about the inherent capacity of the planning system to deliver sustainable development. From here, tangible mechanisms to deliver the goals of sustainable development must be determined and put into action, and these must work in tandem with the other core priorities of planning authorities – efficiency and inclusivity.

Identifying what some of these tangible delivery mechanisms might look like was the focus of two days of debate and discussion at the Sustainable Scotland Network’s (SSN) Annual Conference: *Planning Solutions for a Sustainable Scotland*. SSN – the Scottish network of local authority sustainable development advocates – focuses on translating sustainable development from strategic principle into practice. With sustainable development now a mainstreamed objective – both of the Local Government in Scotland Act (2003) and the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill – refining this focus has become increasingly relevant. The Annual Conference provided a rich opportunity to meet this need in the context of local planning.

Thematic sessions on the two-days looked at planning from diverse perspectives. Nuts-and-bolts operational schemes (tools for climate-proofing development plans and costing environmental sustainability, for example) were discussed alongside visionary international exemplar projects (Dongtan Eco-City, the Copenhagen City Plan) demonstrating the purview of the profession.

While the cases explored and tools demonstrated were diverse, they conveyed a number of clearly united themes. Firstly – a point reinforced by speakers throughout the two days – the role of local planning in delivering sustainable development is well established. Graham U’ren’s opening address welcomed the theme of the conference with the words, “planning lies at the heart of sustainable development”, a sentiment that was reinforced by Karen Whitefield MSP, Jim McKinnon (Chief Planner for Scotland) and City of Edinburgh Councillor Trevor Davies (Convenor of the Planning Committee).

As Jim McKinnon made clear, “the working reality of planning professionals has long been about finding balance between social, economic and environmental health.” Planners are necessarily purveyors of the long view, public participation is inherent to the success of plans and there is increasingly capacity for development that reduces carbon footprints and private transport needs. Clearly the interface between planning and sustainable development is sizeable. The second main theme of the day, then, was, justifiably, refinement: what should be the *priorities* of a planning authority that is focussed on delivering sustainable development?

Sustainable development, while having a broad reach, has at its core the simple principle of improving quality of life. The potential for the planning system to deliver on this was reinforced throughout the day, and never more effectively than in the case study of Copenhagen City Authority’s 10-year plan. The Master Plan for the city is absolutely uncompromising in its prioritisation of public space and pedestrianisation, features which have been key to the City’s recent renaissance. Ensuring the absolute prioritisation of principles of health and green space, through

joint-working mechanisms between land-use and transport planning, is one practical route to achieving sustainable development through the planning system. The emphasis on joint-working was restated throughout the day, with participants celebrating the diversity of departments represented on the day: sustainable development will not be achieved through the planning system without sustainable development practitioners and planning professionals entering into dialogue.

One of the most effective and pressing areas of focus for planning authorities is climate change adaptation and mitigation. Jim McKinnon urged the assembled planners and sustainable development practitioners to respond to this “environmental imperative” with “effective, proactive and positive” action. The conference illustrated what a proactive response to the climate change challenge might look like, notably in the case of the now infamous Merton Rule. This innovative local policy, devised by Adrian Hewitt of the London Borough of Merton Council, places an expectation for a 10% reduction in carbon emissions on all developers. The policy adequately demonstrates the potential for novel local planning initiatives that are simple to introduce and sustain (the policy is administered using a simple spreadsheet, which is also made available to external developers) and which are, fundamentally, replicable (Midlothian Council’s development of a similar policy is testament to this fact). Policies that integrate with existing frameworks and expertise, and that can do likewise in other authority areas are, then, essential to the practical delivery of sustainable development.

The Merton case study also demonstrates the third and final theme of the conference – local leadership and political courage. Without planning professionals and politicians that have vision, the foresight to involve all relevant departments in policy development, and the tenacity to see their vision through to a pragmatic solution, planning will fail to meet its potential role in the delivery of sustainable solutions.

The SSN’s conference website www.sustainable-scotland.net/conference2006 contains audio recordings of all of the presentations that were made at the Conference. The SSN team can also be contacted via their main website www.sustainable-scotland.net