

Roundtable 3 - PLANNING

Chair: Professor Glenn Lyons - UWE Bristol

Chair's introduction

We need to reduce global emissions by 45% by 2030. It hardly seems that spatial planning is the place to look for that. Planning is a slow process. Changing the built environment is a slow process. We don't have time!

But planning of the past has been complicit in shaping the present in which we now confront the stark reality of dependence on a transport system, the considerable direct and indirect emissions of which are no longer tolerable. Planning of today and tomorrow will in turn have long-lasting ramifications for society. How we now plan is therefore no less important in the fight against climate change for the decades ahead, for future generations.

And requirements for a different sort of planning could send powerful signals to developers, local authorities, businesses and households about the need for change – signals that could influence their strategic decisions. Retrofitting *existing* development might make more immediate contributions, alongside a changed approach to planning *future* development. Better planning could at least help prevent things getting worse than they already are.

The discussion outlined below highlights opportunities that exist for better planning to help tackle decarbonisation. It is also a painful reminder that they are difficult to seize without appropriate skills, greater imagination, appropriate incentives and, most of all, strong leadership.

A Sisyphean task

Decarbonisation of transport will require a decisive shift away from our car-based consumer culture. Despite this, we are moving towards more car dependant developments. How do we change direction and how do we stop building towards a carbon intensive, car dependant future?

It was argued that planning in relation to transport “is enormously fraught on a whole number of levels”.

To begin with, there is the issue of who makes what decisions. For example, a local district planning decision to add some houses on the end of a village is taken without any regards to transport. Difficulties of access, including access to public transport (if any exists), are not taken into account.

For larger-scale developments it is accounted for - but often superficially - “usually about where the roundabout is going to be”.

Another contributor argued that we need to challenge planners and developers to give more attention to matters of access, beyond how people travel to work, with wider consideration due to how to access shops, places of education, leisure opportunities and so on.

The introduction, 20 years ago, to WebTAG [which contains the Department for Transport's guidance on appraisal of transport schemes], focused attention on how 'to produce the most efficient transport system knowing the trips that people want to make'.

So planners took a view of the trips and then worked out what kind of transport system would most quickly solve the problem of how to fulfil the making of those trips. There was no regard to influencing the number of trips, and no regard to influencing mode choice or to questioning whether slow(er) modes had legitimacy or even appeal.

"It was all about speed because the whole thing was predicated on the value of time, which everybody was going to be able to save and use for other purposes if they went faster from A to B.

"If there's one thing that we've learnt it's that people don't save time, they go further, they go farther, they use a different mode, but they're not saving time. The amount of time that people are prepared to spend travelling has been pretty much constant for the last 50 years.

"We have to continue to attack the way transport decisions are made."

Effective transport planning was likened to a Sisyphean task. One contributor observed: "We have known since the 1960s that transport and land-use are closely linked and that land use policy affects travel patterns. Yet 60 years on we are still seeing housing developments in the wrong places, and designed in a way that embeds car use. Despite all these planning reforms over the last 60 years we have not actually managed to tackle that."

Another contributor pointed out that each country has its own DNA and its own way of doing things, and each country thinks that the way it does it is the right way.

"The UK has always been a country that makes sure it does things properly, it has committees and research etc. This is why you are going to have a high-speed rail line half a century after the French managed to do it. I'm not saying that's wrong. I'm just saying it happens in different ways."

"In the UK we get stuff back from the authorities saying we love what you're doing, and we really believe in it and this is the way forward. But just in case let's build the road anyway and we will do your stuff too. There comes a point in the planning process when we really need to be stronger and say 'no'.

Another contributor remarked: "What planning must do is stop things getting worse even if it can't turn it's attention to making things better as rapidly as we might like."

A broken system

Offering a local authority perspective, one contributor remarked: "I've been really really shocked by the lack of connection between planning and transport. Transport is brought in through the lens of people who just need to get planning applications through.

"It's interesting to try and change the order that conversations happen. There are joined up conversations within authorities but at the moment planning is at odds with where I am trying to come from with a transport and highways perspective. A travel plan

doesn't make an unsustainable development sustainable and it never will. We are trying to get them to consider the long-term carbon impact that they are going to have with the planning applications that are coming in in."

Developers want high levels of viability in line with their own objectives, and to get applications through, and they push resource-deficient local authorities to agree to things. They take sites and they break them up and they sell them on, and this fragmentation means that you don't get the overarching picture you want for developments.

"I've seen some cases that will make your hair stand on end. Completely car dependent development with no urban realm, no connectivity, no pavements, no pathways - there's no chance of people making any journeys by anything other than car. They haven't got connections, they haven't got services - middle low-density, car-based development that you need to drive to get anywhere to."

There is work to be done to educate planners on the need for new approaches: "There's an absolute tonne of work to be undertaken in this discipline to actually get people from a local authority on the same page, to help them to understand they've been in this role for 20 years but things have changed. Aspirations are different, ambitions are different, and that 25% change [reduction in car kilometres] by 2030 doesn't figure in anybody's mind unless they are in a conversation like this." That said, sometimes the car can appear the only credible option in locations where public transport is all but non-existent.

A local authority perspective suggested that officers had not been given the right questions to ask in terms of looking at schemes, and assessing their appropriateness. Meanwhile, the environment they are working in is very pressurised and very political. "At the end of the day if we are coming to building stuff and if we haven't got the right conditions, if we haven't got the right requirements, then all of the top-level strategy goes to dust. We need to make sure that the system is fit for purpose. It's broken at the moment.

"We need to do a lot of work putting that back together at all the different levels. We have the policy and strategy but we do not have it at the implementation level, but it can be done."

Another contributor who has worked in local authorities also called for a mindset change: "We think of transport as something that comes along at a late stage and tries to mop up disasters ... It seems to me that we do all these things back to front and then wonder why it doesn't work. We haven't resolved that over many decades.

"Planning authorities have really got to go away and read their own policies because everyone says the right stuff. There are some lovely things in local plans and local transport plans that you can't disagree with, it's just that they do the opposite in practice. So if we were policy-led we would be in an entirely different place."

Meanwhile, in relation to passenger transport, it was observed that having one bus per hour does not mean that a development is sustainable: "The crisis that is now hitting passenger transport, in terms of not only changing demands but ever escalating costs, means that you cannot necessarily plan for these things in the way that we used to."

Another contributor also argued that the system was broken. "The most polluting aspect of transport is the one that the government makes around £25bn annual profit out of. And we have a planning system that gets in the way of people who want to do the right thing from a decarbonisation standpoint rather than help them. We are not even enabling the people who are really keen on doing the right thing.

“People on the edge of cities like Bristol, Oxford and Cambridge have been trying to put in things that are very car light and they are engaged in battles of one kind or another with planning authorities around the driveway - the provision of overly generous ratios of car parking spaces to dwellings in very convenient places – and the roundabout or the junction. I'm not blaming the people involved in those planning authorities, it's the system.”

Meanwhile, another pointed out that shops and mobility hubs need to be built first, “not in Phase 6 of the development by which time everybody drives”.

Planning reform

Are we going to see planning reform with teeth anytime soon? It was suggested that if we do it's most likely to be in the Government's Levelling Up Bill, which is expected in Summer 2022. It provides an opportunity to crystallise two or three big things that some would like to see.

For example, the self-imposed legal obligation on the Government to achieve net zero by 2050 is not currently reflected in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in the way that it ought to be.

“You're only going to affect change in new development significantly if you've got that legal obligation. There are some councils that are going over and above in their local plans, but most of them don't have to [so they don't].”

The structure of local government was another area where planning reforms could be implemented. As a result of research and conversations with chief planning officers, larger unitary authorities were cited as being successful places that are capable of joining the dots and delivering at scale. They have chief planning officers who are in control of planning, the climate change brief, building control and highways and transportation. They are therefore able to move away from silos towards a more integrated systems approach.

There was a plea to consider developers when implementing planning reforms. “We've got to be very careful not to create system that is going to be incredibly difficult and complicated and expensive to use as we put more controls into it because that is the way that you then get developers pushing back against it, or indeed having to spend so much time making the plan they actually haven't got any money left for the public realm or design improvements. They default to business as usual, because even doing that is hard. We need to think about it from the user point of view as well what is great policy.”

Another contributor also called for consideration of the developer. “They have an enormously important role to play in this. At the moment what we get in from developers is very, very far away from what we've asked them to put forward. Then it's such a long and protracted negotiation and politicians get involved. Then we just acquiesce and go for the path of least resistance. So I think the developer and the part they play in this is absolutely huge.”

Wales was highlighted as a positive example of where everything is being considered through the lens of protecting future generations. In policy terms this means that planning now comes under the environment brief.

The correct hierarchy of decision-making should be about carbon first and trip generation later. “We've got so many examples where decisions for really good mixed use, sustainable applications have been thrown out because there weren't enough parking spaces.” Another contributor pointed out that Active Travel England is coming into play and will get powers to intervene and make a difference.

Cross boundary issues were identified as an area where reforms were needed. “You can't think about Somerset without thinking about North Somerset and Wiltshire and Bath and North East Somerset, because they are all approving developments that are loading onto the same roads.”

“You need to move from moving vehicles as a success measure of roads to measuring people. As long as you just measure throughput of vehicles you are not going to give priority to car sharing or coaches or buses, because they are just one vehicle.

“We need sub-national plans covering, say, the whole of Lancashire rather than trying to pick things out.

“We need to highlight that other countries do this differently and better.”

Phygital mobility

“How many elephants do you need in the room? God comes along and he says I think everybody should work closer to home so I'm going to give you the internet. So he gives you the internet and people keep commuting long distances and using the internet at the other end. So he thinks 'I've had enough of that', so he gives us a pandemic. Everybody has to work at home, some people can't. It goes on for long enough that we know no how it works and when it works. Now he's saying that our energy in the future may not be very resilient, and it will be a lot more expensive, and your pocket is going to be more empty. Everything is pointing towards the need to localise facilities.

“We need to plan for *phygital* mobility - physical and digital, you can't separate the two in 2022. You've got to have the two together.”

Taking up this point, another added: “We have to see that there is a silver lining in the set of crises that we are facing right now. The silver lining may disappear if we are not careful. There are opportunities that are unprecedented within that for the taking, and digital clearly is one of them.”

Devolution

One of the things that the National Infrastructure Commission has pushed really consistently is the need for devolution, said one contributor, “because it's only when you get into some proper devolution that you can bring some of those decisions together”.

“While it's all being dealt with in those silos, slowly feeding down, you can't pull the thing back together.”

Other contributors also cited the importance of devolution. “It's that combination of devolved power and some funding settlements. Small changes spreading are actually going to be more effective and more acceptable than trying to have some big top-down ‘everybody must do this’ solution”.

Density

A piece of work by the Centre for Cities was cited. It drew comparisons with continental cities, where city centre density is much higher and where people will tend to live in low-rise apartments with decent public space. Such developments are rare in the UK.

The Barbican in the City of London was cited as an example of such a development. This was a highly successful development but it never really caught on as a way to manage more dense developments. More dense developments like this are required if we are going to support a public transport system and offer shorter distances necessary to make cycling or walking attractive. There is therefore a question about what sort of templates of development we should be talking about.

Meanwhile, “minor densification”, spread out over a lot of places, was suggested as a way to make a big difference. This could involve adding a storey to a house or adding a storey right along a High Street. “That is the kind of way in which we might make urban and intra-urban transport more sustainable and attractive, because to get behaviour change you have to make something more attractive.”

Carrots as well as sticks are needed to influence behaviour. “If we prescribe behaviour change that makes people feel worse off it's not going to get very far, so I think we have a challenge on making density more attractive.”

However, templates are needed for dense developments that are also attractive places for people to live and raise families. Manchester was cited as an example of a place that has built new high-rise blocks, but is this really the kind of development that people want to live in, especially when they have a family? How do you manage active travel safely for children in such environments, for example? How do you stop the school car trip?

Trip chains

Trip chains, journeys which link up several locations, such as the school-run, a shopping trip and a commute to and from work, were cited as being among the core questions that we should really focus on.

Those chain trips are done with things like pushchairs and small kids, and they are many times more effectively done in a private vehicle than other modes.

That encapsulates the challenge, and behaviour change must therefore be supported by effective infrastructure.

That means going back and challenging the design of new developments, particularly in relation to making them more walker-friendly, because they are often lacking. “I was absolutely shocked when we first went and looked at some of the new developments in Milton Keynes and you realise that you really wouldn't want to walk around them. They weren't friendly to that. Even if you could walk into them you wouldn't walk out of them into anything else.”

Funding

There was a plea for the Government to give long-term funding settlements to local authorities so that they can make long-term plans.

Another contributor observed some progress on equipping local authorities with the resources they need: “There is something going on at government. We are starting to get support to provide capacity and capability to local authorities in the build up to what is potentially a rapid development of Local Transport Plans.”

The Housing Infrastructure Fund was identified as helping to promote car-dependent developments. This money is generally for road construction and is on “a ridiculously short” timescale because it's designed to speed up housing delivery.

“This means you have to take all the decisions with speed otherwise you lose the funding. Councillors are not going to turn down the funding from government so they approve the big roads immediately, before the development is even designed.

“There’s no commitment to sustainable travel or anything else. The game is lost. That is the culture that we need to change.”

Another said: “We have to get away from this business of writing business cases to get housing infrastructure funding when the principal was already established that this was where we needed to put housing and infrastructure ... Other countries across Europe just don't do it like that. They just get on with stuff.”

Another highlighted that funding was in short supply. “We don't have enough money on planning. We don't have enough planners. We don't have enough transport planners. We need people to be able to deliver the cycling schemes that we need. We need people to be able to deliver the buses network that we need. And we need people to deliver the future charging infrastructure that is needed.”

There are revenue streams appearing, but they are all individual. “There is nothing about joining it all together or giving local flexibility. An authority might decide that they don't need charging points, they need to invest in buses or cycling. It's not done like that which is deeply frustrating. I think there is more flexibility in the Mayoral Combined Authority areas. They say there is going to be more flexibility coming with the new County Deals. We will see.”

Outdated data

The Government has been working on the presumption that we need 300,000 homes a year, but some are now questioning this.

In January, the Office of National Statistics republished its projections for population growth, but it didn't say anything that we did not already know. We already knew that the natural reproduction rate in the UK is mimicking the rest of Europe. It is around 1.6, which is below the replacement level of 2.1. It has been below that level for some time.

Immigration has plateaued in the UK the policies for immigration becoming stricter. The projected population growth is therefore flattening out. There is still some growth projected for about 10-15 years and then a plateau, but it could be that the plateau has already begun.

The data that is still being used to assess housing needs was produced years ago, and it was argued that we don't now need 300,000 new homes a year. We need considerably fewer.

At the same time, transport planning still uses TRICS [a database of trip rates for developments, used in the United Kingdom for transport planning purposes, specifically to quantify the trip generation of new developments], which is also based on older population data¹.

“We are over scaling,” it was argued. “Maybe it's not radical but it's significant enough that over time we are designing the wrong places.”

¹ It should be noted that the way in which the 30+ year time span of the TRICS database is used to inform development planning has recently been reviewed and a new TRICS ‘Guidance Note on the Practical Implementation of Decide and Provide’ published - <http://www.trics.org/decideandprovideguidance.html>

Retrofitting

It was argued that planning professionals are focussed very much on the delivery of new housing and major developments. However, “we forget the key and crucial thing now is to restructure the city we have and make the cities we have fit for the next century”.

A contributor agreed that there is a huge opportunity to retrofit existing communities. “People say ‘there's nothing more sustainable than an old car’, well actually let's stick with the developments we've already got. They may not be that well connected but they are a lot better than starting off with a greenfield site somewhere in the middle of nowhere.”

The Transport for New Homes² campaign has gone out and examined what is being built on the ground across England. On a positive note, one contributor noted: “Some of the site visits ... suggested that some really quite small bits of retrofitting would make a huge difference. Basically all the people involved in managing and planning those places don't actually believe that anybody would ever walk there and they've never tried it themselves. There are bits of walkway that finish off in muddy puddles. Some quite small-scale retrofitting would make a huge difference.”

Another contributor argued that retrofitting is not going to be easy but it is fundamental. “Building within your existing towns is a challenge but it's well worth the effort, and the uplift in land values that you get from it can go some way towards paying it.

“Retrofitting new settlements into the existing transport infrastructure is a more effective way of moving forward and tends to upset fewer people. But you have to guarantee from the outset that the locations you use are those which are already well served by public transport.”

Politics

Short electoral timeframes don't allow for a long payback and that was identified as an in-built challenge.

The roll-out of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods demonstrated the importance of having a mandate. This is attained by working with local people and local communities. A constant narrative enables politicians and planners to take people with them.

At a national level, consistency from government is required. “At the moment we still get too many inconsistent messages.”

The National Bus Strategy for England, *Bus Back Better*, was cited as an example of this inconsistency. At first there was £3bn of funding available, but now there is £1.2bn. At the same time, fuel duty has been reduced by 5p.

There are mixed messages on cycling too. Councils were instructed to get on with implementing pro-cycling measures and then found themselves being criticised by Grant Shapps, the Secretary of State for Transport, for the way they were doing it.

“We hear messages that ‘Motorists are King’ and yet we want to do all this stuff on decarbonisation.”

Another pointed out that public opinion of the importance of addressing climate change is also inconsistent. Opinion polling ahead of last autumn's COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow

² <https://www.transportfornewhomes.org.uk/the-project/building-car-dependency/>

showed that concern for the environment was at the highest it has ever been since the beginning of the survey back in the 1980s. However, a couple of months after COP26 it dropped 26 points. “The public is seemingly so volatile in the midst of so many things to be exercised about.”

Another contributor observed: “It’s easiest to be a strong leader when you’ve got everybody behind you pushing you forward.”

The problem is that people too often suggest simple solutions for what appear to be simple problems – for example, “oh congestion, we need more roads” – and it doesn’t work.

Who is the person who can come forward and explain all of this clearly to people? *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams was cited as a wonderful way of ridiculing the unthinking construction of a by-pass. Greta Thunberg has meanwhile come along helped to elevate consciousness of climate change to new levels: “There has been fabulous amounts of work by really clever people for years and years but one person suddenly elevates it.”

High profile champions are perhaps crucial, with another contributor identifying cycling campaigner Chris Boardman as another figurehead who can “cut through and reach the public in a way that professional ranks can’t”.

Focusing on outcomes

“It’s always a road project, a housing project, a retrofit project,” said one contributor. “They are not really talking to each other and they are not really aligned.”

It was suggested that local authorities should instead be focussed on pre-agreed outcomes defined by very clear metrics.

“Endless vision documents say the right things but they never follow through. That’s because nobody is establishing any metrics.

“With highways in particular it is quite clear what their metrics are and what their incentives are, which is often safety to move vehicles without getting congestion on the roads. But they don’t really have any other metrics for well-being, sustainability, happiness. Until we do that there will always be the person in the room trying to argue for the wider road or against changing a piece of infrastructure.”

Reform of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) offers an opportunity to include “some really strict metrics”. “It might be that you need to have a line in the NPPF that talks about modal share. It is very easy for people to nod to sustainable transport and say they have given it consideration, but until you say ‘your development must achieve a modal share which is set out in the Transport Decarbonisation Plan’, whether it’s 50% active and sustainable, that could answer the question about why we keep building in places that we really shouldn’t be putting homes at the moment.

“So then if you throw 2,000 homes on an airfield you are going to be measured against that 50%. You are going to have to put in a Bus Rapid Transit and that will then come out of the land price itself. Then you will quickly see people not building in these areas.”

Another contributor added: “We need a much more objective-led approach to metrics. Personally I have been inspired by Professor Chris Whitty, the way he stands next to the Prime Minister with his trajectories. Instead of looking a year back and saying ‘it’s getting worse’, we are trying to adjust the trajectory to whatever the milestone is.”

But metrics require data that is not always freely available. “Just landing a single dataset on electric vehicle ownership takes time. We shouldn't underestimate the amount of effort it is to actually do things like data engineering to get things into dashboards to deliver to decision-makers on what the future looks like, rather than what last year looked like. We need more forecast metrics than just observed metrics.”

On the subject of forecast metrics, another added: “There are no metrics for the future because we haven't got there yet. So what are the possible ranges of outcomes, and are they the ones we actually want? That gives us a way of actually visualising them and enabling people to think about whether this is good place to end up. The future is going to be different from the past whether we like it or not.”

Bringing people together

It was observed that there was a lot of violent agreement in the meeting, but “how can we bring like-minded people together to help each other on communications, advocate and assist each other?”

The Sustainable Transport Alliance was cited as an example of a structure that brings together existing green NGOs in a loose wrapper. They try to help each other out and meet every fortnight.

Another contributor added: “We really do need a learning by doing and sharing culture around this if we have to move forward. Yes, we need change at pace and at scale across the country, but if we can find those beacon developments and authorities and make sure they are very visible to others then perhaps there really is a formula for responsible innovation ahead of us.”

ENDS