



Success and innovation in planning

This briefing is based on research conducted for the RTPI by Newcastle University which examines how places can be transformed through planning interventions. The full research includes a range of case studies of UK planning. At a time when planning is under pressure, the research identifies what makes major or significant projects successful.

Who should read this?

A wide range of people involved in how places are planned, from those actively involved in planning practice, to those from a policy background seeking to influence the future of planning policy and practice.

Key messages for policy and practice

The case studies examined in this research show how planning can make a difference to economies, environments and livelihoods. They also have a range of implications for policy and practice, including:

The planning system

- The statutory planning system operates best when the political will exists to use it and to achieve clear goals. Endless tinkering with the formal system is not conducive to innovation, however.
- Resources, particularly public money, are important to secure public benefits.
- Land ownership is important – innovation and the success of developments are significantly enhanced by taking a longer term approach to developing land.
- Creating a new ‘institutional space’ such as through a special purpose vehicle (SPV) can be helpful, especially where goals are clear.
- Effective stakeholder involvement at an early stage of any project or plan and throughout is also often important.

Promoting innovation

- Experimentation and space for risk-taking is important. There needs to be (political) space for a degree of failure.
- A long history of attention to a place or plan is important in generating the knowledge and relationships that lead to genuine transformation.
- Innovation needs to be managed – a process is needed to routinize and embed new thinking into practices.

Taking a strategic and integrated approach

- A holistic (integrated and comprehensive) understanding of a place helps to bring different issues together to overcome policy ‘silos’ and secure public benefits.
- Projects work best when they are appropriately and creatively framed with clear and consistent strategic goals but also with flexibility in implementation.
- Urban design, both in the detail of development but also in wider masterplanning processes, can be vital for success.

Building capacity

- How ideas are communicated is important to securing support and legitimacy.
- Building a ‘civic capacity’ (of individuals to be active citizens and work together to solve problems) can be crucial to projects, especially implementation.
- The technical skills and knowledge of professional planners is vital, for example on legal aspects, governance processes and urban design.
- Public sector capacity is important to facilitate discussions about what could be done in a place and what has been tried before.



Main findings

The research on which this briefing is based identifies successful and even transformative innovations in the planning field – where people have tried to do things differently in a wide range of creative ways, which have made a positive and potentially enduring difference to places.

The aim of the research was to focus on success stories, to counteract the continual critique to which planning systems are subject, particularly in England. The research provides an antidote to what the late Sir Peter Hall famously wrote about in *Great Planning Disasters* (some of which actually turned out to be more successful than was initially the case).

The research shows how planning experts, mostly working within public agencies and formal local planning authorities, have been innovative in searching for more effective ways of producing good outcomes in terms of place qualities and ‘public value’, despite the inevitable constraints imposed upon them by wider contexts and conditions. As the case studies in the research show, there is much to celebrate in UK planning, despite the constraints within which planners often work.

Despite their breadth, and in some instances uniqueness, some common messages for policy and practice emerge from the case studies regarding what might unleash greater levels of innovation in UK planning, namely:

- The importance of the formal planning system;
- The ability to innovate in place governance;
- The significance of planning in developing strategy and in coordinating with other policy sectors; and
- The importance of local civic and institutional capacity in achieving planning goals and securing public value.

The planning system

The statutory planning system can be very useful but it operates best when the political will exists to use it and to achieve clear goals – for example in the case studies of the London Olympics and Manchester city centre regeneration (as described in the full report).

Endless tinkering with the formal system is not conducive to innovation, however.

Resources, particularly public money, are important to secure public goods and values – for example the case studies of the Salford Quays regeneration and Manchester city centre.

Land ownership is important; innovation and long term success of development is dramatically enhanced by taking a longer term approach to developing land – for example the case studies of Newhall and the Sherwood Energy Village.

Creating a new ‘institutional space’, such as through a special purpose vehicle (SPV), can be helpful especially where institutional goals are clear – for example the case studies of the London Olympics and the Grainger Town Partnership.

Effective stakeholder involvement throughout and at an early stage of any project or plan is often significant – for example the case studies of Bristol’s approach to localism and the Grainger Town Partnership.

Promoting innovation

Experimentation and space for risk-taking is important. An organisation may not always get it right first time, there needs to be (political) space for a degree of failure – for example the case studies of the Hadrian’s Wall Plan and Rugby development management reform.

It is important to learn from good practice, from the local situation and further afield, but also to be reflective about what may be transferable – for example the case studies of Manchester city centre and the Grainger Town Partnership.

A long history of attention to a subject – a place or plan – is important in generating the knowledge and relationships that lead to genuine transformation. Sometimes this can help in rapid transformations building on the knowledge accumulated over time, in others a ‘slow’ approach to planning pays dividends in terms of quality of outcomes – for example the case studies of the Hadrian’s Wall Plan and Gateshead Quays.



Innovation has to be managed: a process is needed to routinize and embed new thinking into practices – for example the case study of the Hadrian's Wall Plan.

Strategic and integrated approach

A holistic (integrated, comprehensive) understanding of place helps to bring different issues together to overcome policy silos and secure public value beyond the planning system – for example the case studies of the Hadrian's Wall Plan and Marine spatial planning.

Projects work best when they are appropriately and creatively framed with clear and consistent strategic goals but with flexibility in implementation – for example the case studies of Gateshead Quays and Manchester city centre.

Urban design, both in the detail of development but also in wider masterplanning processes, especially articulated through codes and frameworks can be very important for success – for example the case studies of Manchester city centre and Newhall.

Building capacity

How ideas are communicated is highly significant in securing support and legitimacy for action – for example the case studies of TAYplan and Bristol's approach to localism.

Paying attention to building a civic capacity (the capacity of individuals to be active as citizens and work together to solve collective problems), to contribute and underpin place governance work, is important for the knowledge and values it brings and for better implementation – for example the case studies of the Grainger Town Partnership and Bristol's localism.

Technical skills and knowledge are vital. In our cases this is often provided by professional planners drawing on codified and tacit knowledge. This can relate to legal aspects, the design of governance processes, and specialist advice such as in urban design – for example the case studies of Manchester city centre and Gateshead Quays.

Public sector capacity is very important to facilitate deliberation about what might be done in a place and to carry the memory of what has been tried before – for example the case studies of Salford Quays and Manchester city centre regeneration.

Wider implications for policy

This research also raises some wider implications for policy in relation to planning.

The challenges facing planning

Three factors in particular affect the performance of the planning system in the UK.

Firstly, government, especially in England, is highly centralised and organised into policy delivery sectors ('silos') which make co-ordination in specific places difficult. This situation can be exacerbated where national political priorities are imposed across the system, despite the very different social, economic and environmental conditions in different parts of the UK's devolved nations. The situation is made even more complex where local political boundaries bear little relationship to the relations and borders which people typically recognise in day-to-day life.

Secondly, attempts to reform and re-focus planning systems in recent years have tended to be narrowly focused on crude performance measures designed to improve efficiency and on achieving single objectives, notably increasing housing supply, without attention to the many dimensions which create quality places. Reduced funding to local government and national performance demands have tended to create local organisational cultures focused on meeting these nationally-set targets rather than finding ways of improving places in discussion with citizens and other stakeholders. The accelerated financialisation of aspects of public planning in recent years is not wholly bad, but accounting for long-term public benefit is difficult within such a framework. In this context, innovation may be limited to finding ways to achieve these external targets rather than delivering enduring place qualities and creating public value.



Thirdly, the planning system has drifted into a more quasi-legal form which stifles creativity, particularly in terms of plan-making. Plan-making has become entrenched in its own overly bureaucratic silo from which local planners find it hard to escape. When coupled with the intense local political debates over land allocation, it is easier to understand why in this research there were no nominations proposed for innovative, successful statutory plans in England.

Despite these limitations, the case studies included in the research show that many municipal planners and planning consultants, often working over considerable periods with local politicians, other stakeholders and citizens, have been able to make a positive difference. They have promoted and enabled projects which have created new and valued place qualities. They have helped to generate strategic visions which inspire others to shape and co-ordinate their projects to generate public value as well as individual gain. They have re-organised practices to provide a responsive, efficient and fair development management service.

The case studies show how innovative the planning sector can be when given the opportunity, freedom and resources. The problem is that this does not happen as often as it could, or should. Even with the recent championing of localism, England still has one of the most centralised planning systems in the world. In addition, recent policy decisions by the Coalition Government have resulted in removal of much of the strategic planning capacity from sub-national institutions. There have been a number of reports published recently which have advocated greater devolved strategic planning powers to regions and below. The report on which this briefing is based should be seen as providing more evidence for the greater devolution of (strategic) planning powers to the lowest possible level. This will allow joined-up, long-term planning of the types highlighted in the report.

By devolving more strategic planning powers away from Whitehall in particular there will also

be opportunities for the planning process to be used to tackle wider societal challenges – ageing, economic growth and climate change for example – not just directly through the built environment but indirectly by building in joined up service delivery. Further, such devolution would allow planners to develop tailored solutions which recognise the cultural and social context in which planning decisions are made, and to engage the communities affected by the changes. By allowing devolved, transparent and participatory decision-making at a level appropriate for the decision in question, the legitimacy of any innovation can be established. The success of public innovation is not judged in the same way as private innovation. To succeed, public innovation needs to be seen to have a legitimate process, as well as delivering the required outcome.

This devolution of powers must also be accompanied by devolution of resources. The case studies highlighted in this report illustrate that a critical factor in the success of any innovation is continuity of vision and leadership. This can only happen if there is continuity of resources. This would enable long-term strategic planning to deliver the infrastructure, environmental benefits and housing areas required to grow and thrive.

About the research

This briefing is based on research conducted for the RTPI by Professor Geoff Vigar, Dr Paul Cowie, and Emeritus Professor Patsy Healey OBE, at the Global Urban Research Unit, Newcastle University.

The full report is available on the RTPI website at: www.rtpi.org.uk/spire

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