



RTPI

Royal Town Planning Institute

**The Great Debate
General Assembly
Discussion Series**

2023 DEBATES

The Great Debate

**Addressing some of the most pressing
issues facing planning today.**

[rtpi.org.uk](https://www.rtpi.org.uk)

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About the RTPI

The RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 27,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors and over 1,300 members in Wales. Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social environmental and cultural challenges.

About this report

This report has been written by RTPI Immediate Past President Sue Bridge FRTPI. Sue is a Chartered Town Planner with 30 years' experience as a planning practitioner in local government and over 12 years in the development industry. She was Head of Planning for six years at Northampton Borough Council and has a proven track record in successfully managing the department through a difficult period of change and transformation. Since 2014 Susan has worked as an independent planning consultant working with both public and private sector clients. She has practical experience of dealing with a wide range of projects from rural exception sites to new settlements and sustainable urban extensions with a proven track record of working in partnership in a multi-agency and disciplinary environment. Sue was Chair of the Board of Trustees from July 2019 to the end of 2022 and was RTPI President 2023.

Report author

Sue Bridge FRTPI

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The Great Debate

The membership of the RTPI includes practitioners and experts from across the profession. Our State of the Profession report from 2023 showed that members come from the public and private sector in equal amounts and make up approximately 75% of those working in planning in the UK. That range of knowledge and experience is an impressive resource.

As the representative of the membership, the General Assembly, the debating chamber of the Institute, brings in voices from different specialisms, parts of the country and at various stages of their career. As a group it is truly impressive with countless years of combined experience and knowledge across every sector of the profession.

As president and chair of the General Assembly I wanted to harness that expertise and knowledge for the greater benefit of the institute. It comes together in-person four times a year to debate planning policy and practice, and discuss important issues relating to the profession and the Institute. I established the Great Debate series to run through 2023. My hope was to give the General Assembly some of the knottiest or most pressing issues facing planning today to debate and establish a way to tackle them. I promised to raise the points made with the Institute's Policy Practice and Research Committee (PPRC). This report is a summary of those debates and will be handed on to the PPRC and other relevant standing committees and the wider membership to act as a prompt for future work.

For my 2023 debates the General Assembly tackled:

- Strategic Planning
- Digital Planning and Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its impact on how we work
- The Future of the Green Belt
- How the profession can self-promote to reduce abuse and harassment

Each debate was facilitated and guided by experts in each topic and followed by lively and sometimes difficult discussions, the results and summaries of which can be found in this report.

I was enthused by the passion, interest and new ideas that these debates engendered and will be equally excited to see how the institute responds.

Some steps and activities have already begun as noted in the following reports from each of the debates during my presidential year. In particular, our 'It Takes Planners &' ... campaign has reached more than half a million people.

I would like to thank all the members of the General Assembly for their enthusiasm and thoughtful participation in the debates. It was truly inspiring to see planners talking planning so constructively. I would also like to thank the experts who joined the panel discussions and prompted our vigorous debates. I hope that the information contained in these pages will spark further work and thought from across the membership and possibly encourage more people to put themselves forward for the General Assembly. It truly is a rewarding experience, the General Assembly can and does make a difference to the Institute. Chairing the group throughout 2023 was a great honour.

Strategic planning

At the General Assembly on 22 March 2023, I convened a panel discussion with contributions from David Bainbridge (Savills), Roisin Willmott (formerly RTPI Director for Wales, Northern Ireland & Planning Aid England) and Harry Steele (formerly Infrastructure Specialist for the RTPI).

It was clear in feedback from the table discussions that a key question remained on the level, or lack, of political will across local authorities to cooperate and have the long-term vision to be truly strategic.

Practitioners in the room reflected that local and regional difficulties often produced significant obstacles to the delivery of longer-term plans across the UK and Ireland. Local government therefore needs the 'guiding voice' of an experienced and respected Chief Planning Officer – an important ongoing campaign by the Institute.

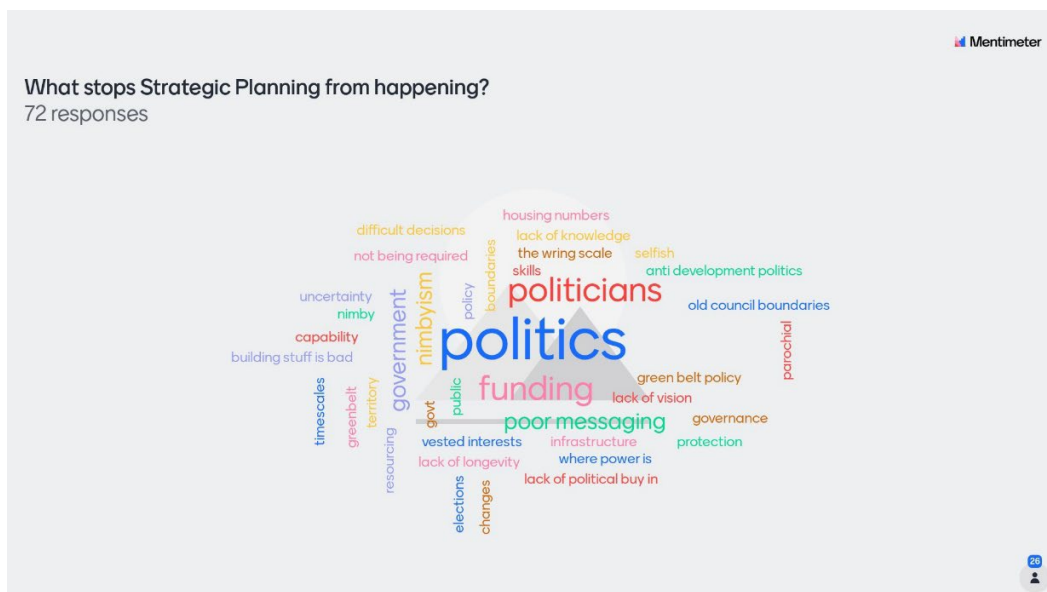
The General Assembly volunteered good practice from those areas that had such an arrangement in place, including Scotland, for other parts of the UK to take up the baton.

Policy conclusions

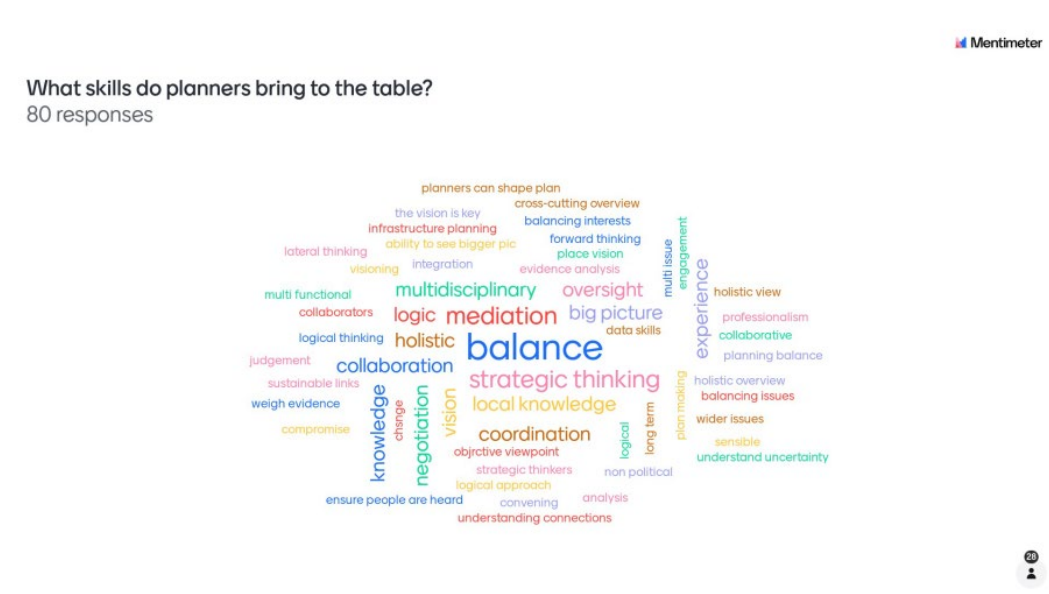
After this plenary session, the GA membership provided their snapshot thoughts captured 'live' online.

Members reported that the benefit of Strategy Planning, in particular, was good decision making outcomes, delivery of infrastructure, vision and tackling the 'big issues'. City-regions could be a useful way forward and members also suggested counties and sub-regional structures as being appropriate administrative geographies which are 'larger than local'.

It was clear that that 'politics' and 'governments' and limits on 'funding' appear to be the main reasons that Strategic Planning does not occur.



Governments and policy makers should understand that planners are well placed to tackle the 'big issues'. Skills we bring to the table include: striking a balance, mediation, logic, local knowledge and clear thinking. Planners can 'see the bigger picture'.



Next steps

I would agree with members and understand why it continues to be an area of focus for them and I am pleased to say an area of focus for the RTPI as a whole through its policy development work and research strategy. A report on the value and practice of Strategic Planning will be published in 2024.

Digital Planning and AI

At the General Assembly on 28 June 2023, I convened a panel discussion with contributions from Nissa Shahid (Arup), Louise Welham (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities), Euan Mills (Co-founder of Blocktype) and Kirsty Holder (formerly digital programme manager, RTPI Scotland).

It was noted from the table feedback that the Institute was well placed to make the most of this new technology and 'de-risk it' as much as possible.

The advance of AI is 'inevitable' since it is happening in many sectors and so planners have to recognise the potential it has to support the delivery of good planning outcomes. However, governments therefore need to set some boundaries and support industry in grappling with this issue as technology continues to develop.

There was a strong reflection that uncertainty will be a factor.

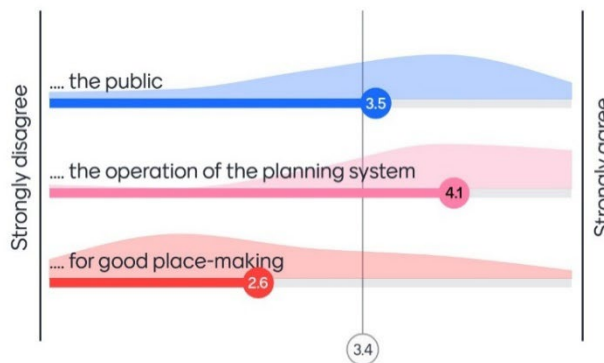
Policy conclusions

After a plenary session, the General Assembly membership provided their snapshot thoughts captured online including the benefits, or not, of AI and digital to the planning profession.

Members felt strongly that AI and digital planning has benefit for the operation of the planning system.

Mentimeter

'AI and Digital' in planning has real benefits for.....



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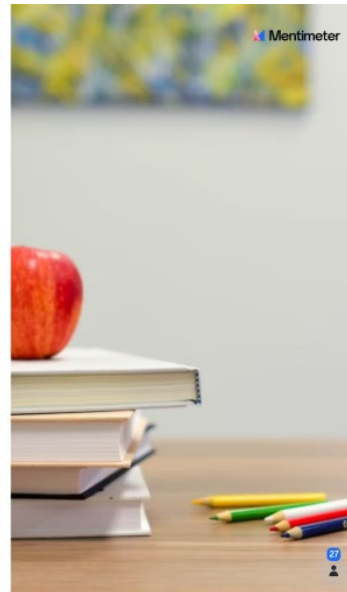
There was healthy discussion about benefits and, in the end, there was a broad consensus that AI and digital has real value and could be 'empowering' for planners and the public but that there should be some 'caution' so unintentional consequences or poor decisions did not result. Governments, policy-makers and practitioners need to be mindful its wholesale introduction is not market driven or at the expense of local knowledge.

The RTPI should focus on training and education at this stage such as case studies, tools for planners, advice and guidance. Governments should focus on investment in the system, show

leadership and improve engagement and the cost-benefits of standardisation in processes, rather than decisions.

The General Assembly concluded that professionalism, ethics, judgement, and experience are the top skills, across a range of expertise, that planners can, and continue to, provide to the public and within planning systems. AI can assist but not replace the judgement of planning professionals.

What skills can planners bring to 'AI / Digital'?



Next steps

Following the debate, the RTPI Chief Executive commissioned the research team to explore these policy matters in more detail. The Institute has scheduled a number of projects as part of the implementation of its Research Strategy into 2024-25. First, a paper on the opportunities for and impacts on the profession and planning systems has been commissioned. I am pleased that a further programme of work has been agreed by the PPRC.

Future of the Green Belt

At the General Assembly on 18 October 2023, I convened a panel discussion with contributions from Dr Charles Goode (Birmingham University), Mark Hand (formerly of Monmouthshire Council) and Andrew Taylor (Vistry Group).

The feedback from the table discussions recognised different perspectives, but there was a clear view that without strategic planning across all RTPI nations ‘we are planning with one hand tied behind our back’. It was noted that the issue remains both a local and national political focus in many areas, and the voice that has been absent from discussions would appear to be that of the professionals who have to assess, support and operate within greenbelt policies; namely planners.

The public’s misunderstanding of what Green Belt is for, as a land use management tool, also needed to be considered.

Policy conclusions

After a plenary session, the General Assembly membership provided their snapshot thoughts online including whether the current policy purposes for the Green Belt, as used in England and Wales, remained fit for purpose in the 21st Century.

The prevention of urban sprawl and prevention of the joining together of major town and cities remain critical for members as purposes of the Green Belt and what members reflected was primarily a land use tool. Members also agreed that the other three more environmental purposes (England and Wales) are relevant but to a slightly lesser extent.

Mentimeter

Purposes of the Green Belt



1 25

However, it could work better and has evolved into an ‘inflexible’ tool as indicated by the words chosen by members to describe how it currently operates.

How does it work 'on the ground'

68 responses



Next steps

Following this discussion, I tasked the PPRC and the national policy committees and forums to consider the findings and relevance to their geographies, important given the localisation of the issue. The England Policy Committee has agreed to consider the Institute's policy position as part of its workplan in 2024.

How the profession can self-promote to reduce abuse and harassment

For my final General Assembly I was keen to revisit one of the key themes of my presidential year: The unacceptability of harassment and abuse of planners.

During my inaugural speech in January 2023, I raised the issue of the difficult circumstances many planners were facing. Following that our membership magazine conducted a UK wide survey to assess the scale of the problem. What emerged was troubling to say the least. The vast majority of members clearly indicated the spread of misinformation on social media was making the situation intolerable.

Since then the RTPI has launched the [It Takes Planners & ...](#) campaign and I urge you to show your support for the campaign through your own social media channels. There are [materials available](#) for you to do that on the website.

I am delighted to say that the film has been viewed more than 320,000 times across our social media platforms.

However, my other theme was a call to action. I asked that members do more to promote the positive impact their work has both after it has been delivered and while they were engaging with the public.

Following an introduction from Simon Wicks, Deputy Editor of Planner Magazine and Simon Creer, Director of Communications for RTPI the General Assembly were set three clear questions:

- What can GA do to encourage more positive community engagement to reduce abuse and harassment?
- What can individual planners do to better promote their work?
- During which parts of the planning process could you use story-telling techniques?

Policy conclusions

The General Assembly responded with one voice that abuse was unacceptable when it came to any profession, but recognised that work needed to be done to understand what role planners could play in changing the narrative around the profession and clearly highlighting the benefits that proper planning brought to communities.

There was a recognition that public engagement was an essential part of the planning process, but more could be done to ensure that planners had the necessary skills to make sure that the engagement was being done in the broadest and most effective way to help the public access it. There was also a clear call consensus that more needed to be done to reflect back to the public what benefits had been brought about through the planning system. This consensus included a call to government to do more to tackle the issue.

Some members of the General Assembly raised the issue that some of the systems and structures that planners worked within made it difficult for them to have a voice in the public conversation. While others made the case that shifting political landscapes often made it difficult to navigate public priorities.



Next Steps

RTPI has committed to exploring ways to upskill the broader membership in modern communication techniques and will follow up this discussion with central government. The Planner Magazine will continue to build a story-telling resource hub for members to draw down expertise and innovative approaches.

Furthermore, the RTPI will conduct a public survey to gain a deeper understanding of how the planning system is viewed and understood and commit to share that learning with members and help to fill any gaps in knowledge where possible.



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For more information about the RTPI's General Assembly visit:

<https://www.rtpi.org.uk/about-the-rtpi/governance/follow-the-debate-with-our-general-assembly/>

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