

Joint POS/BPF Conference 'Rocket Plan'

The fourth joint annual conference held on Thursday 19 April saw some 100 members of POS and the British Property Federation (BPF) come together, despite delays on the rail network, in a very sunny Birmingham. BPF colleagues did a great job in organising the event which was hosted by Pinsent Masons. For those of you who have been to previous events BPF have some music buffs on the organising team – the theme this year was Elton John lyrics – hence the conference title and some subtle and not so subtle references during the day!

The varied agenda included an opportunity to ask questions of Simon Gallagher, Director of Planning at the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) about proposed changes to the NPPF. We also heard about a new initiative, 'Public Practice', aimed at providing additional resources for local planning authorities, Permission in Principle (PiP) and making the most of big infrastructure projects, where we were joined by Victoria Hills the new Chief Executive of the RTPI.

We were reminded that there are a number of draft documents that are currently being consulted on, not just the draft NPPF¹. It was clear that there are still areas which need further work including on the wording of the 'small sites' policy in the NPPF and, whilst the concept of the Housing Delivery Test is set, there is a need to ensure that the parameters are right. It's therefore vital that everyone takes the opportunity to feed back to MHCLG as to how the final documents can be strengthened to ensure that the role of planning and plan-making is clear and made more 'workable'. There were concerns raised that whilst we all are very conscious of the need for local planning authorities to facilitate the delivery of more housing the revised draft has appeared to shift the emphasis to being a 'numbers' game rather than a 'place-making' game.

Following questions from POS members MHCLG acknowledged that there is a real issue in terms of capacity, resources and skills in local authorities, and that the ways of resolving this needed to be given further thought. Increases in planning fees was seen as an interim fix, as the funding of planning services is a complex mix of charging, wider local government funding and resources. MHCLG are encouraging input from those who know how it works, and any approach needs to work across the whole of England. This is very much an issue that POS wants to work proactively with MHCLG on, together with partner organisations such as the Planning Advisory Service (PAS).

Resources for local planning authorities was the topic of the presentation by Public Practice (a new organisation that has been set up to act as a broker, selecting outstanding Associates and matching them to Authorities in need of additional planning and placemaking expertise). It provided a welcome reminder that there is an inspirational and motivated pool of planners wanting to work within the public sector – many are younger members of the profession whilst others are keen to 'give something back'. The rigour of the approach to selecting cohort members and placements was impressive and definitely an initiative to be supported. (More information can be found [here](#))

There appeared to be a fairly unanimous view that the verdict is out as far as PiP is concerned. It was felt that the complexities of the number of approaches and duties now 'on the table' do not necessarily dovetail together and local planning authorities are having to grapple with the whole

¹ Reforms to Developer Contributions; Rules for the Housing Delivery Test and Draft Viability Guidance. Formal responses to the Housing White Paper, Local Housing Need and research on developer contributions have also been published.

range – and that was said by a lawyer! Transparency was also seen as a big issue. The reduced timescales for determining PIP's do not sit comfortably with council decision-making processes/committee cycles and has the potential to undermine the public perception of planning.

The message from the infrastructure session was very much about the need to ensure that we are building communities and that housing without infrastructure doesn't support this. Co-ordination and collaboration across organisations was key to maximising the positive benefits from infrastructure investment, as was looking beyond the project site. Being clear what the infrastructure is for before embarking on the project was essential to the credibility of the project to avoid the potential risk of being seen to retrofit the justification rather than having a robust justification in the first place.

Summing up, the key messages from the day were about co-ordination, resources, leadership and working in partnership – but that planning 'is still standing'!