

The Future Development of Cardiff

Sue Essex

Sue Essex is a planner, who has taught at Cardiff University, a former Leader of Cardiff City Council and a former minister in the Welsh Assembly Government

In her keynote talk, Sue Essex began by referring to the concerns of the civic societies and the Civic Trust movement. Their interest in character and identity, and hence in the visual quality of the built environment, was important. In a conference focusing on the role of the Local Plan, the capacity of Cardiff's new Plan to give meaning to Cardiff's identity and to address issues of environmental quality should be a central theme. Her talk considered some of the challenges facing Cardiff, and Cardiff in the context of Wales. It questioned whether there was an appropriate vision in the Plan either for Cardiff, or for Cardiff as a Welsh city and capital.

Before considering the future, she looked back to the past and the way in which Cardiff had developed as a city. In 1830, Cardiff had been a small market town with some coastal trade. But it grew rapidly as a coal-exporting port in the mid and late 19th century. Its expansion was triggered by the development of the iron and coal industries in Glamorgan's eastern valleys and the opening of new docks by the Bute family. This massive urban growth, which gave rise to the communities of Cathays, Canton, Roath and Plasnewydd, has been documented by Martin Daunton.

Cardiff's status as capital begged the question of the city's relationship with the rest of Wales. Sue pointed out that the city looks more to the sea and the wider world than to the rest of Wales. This tension should be explored, together with the related perception that "Cardiff gets everything". That last statement is of course not true, but, she argued, reflects widely held views, albeit that there has been substantial investment in other areas of Wales. How, then, should Cardiff show leadership and express its role as capital?

Sue suggested that there is a related economic dilemma. One scenario suggests that Cardiff respond to the market potential of its unique location and position on the M4 and become a focus for unrestricted growth. An alternative scenario proposes that investment be dispersed rather than related to a single dynamic centre. Linked to this is a proper understanding of the relationship between Cardiff and its hinterland. Cardiff is not a traditional city region at the centre of a large conurbation. It's not a Birmingham or a Newcastle. It is quite a small city in relation to Wales, having only a tenth of the Welsh population. By comparison, Dublin and Lisbon each have a third of the national population.

In this context, Cardiff needs to be the leader in the South Wales metropolitan area but to recognise also the significance of Swansea and Newport and Merthyr. In practice, Sue claimed, Cardiff needs to work with its neighbours and recognise the relationships imposed by geography and by local government structures. Cardiff's population is small, and it has very tight boundaries – Newport and Bridgend for example have much more land around them.

Cardiff therefore cannot be completely dominant. In planning for the future it needs to respect the history of South Wales and work with rather than compete with its neighbours. In a global world collaboration is the way to survival – and this is true locally given the nature of scarce resources.

Issues for the LDP include both housing and transport, but also a debate as to the kind of future Cardiff should aspire to and the kind of identity it should develop.

Sue argued that as the capital Cardiff has both to display that role and relate to Wales – something some Cardiffians don't find an easy idea. We need to understand that whereas North Wales often express a sense of isolation from Cardiff, people in Cardiff seldom feel isolated from the North. They often feel closer to Bristol and the south-west – with which the city has natural linkages. But Cardiff has to relate to Wales and its hinterland – and one of the reasons it didn't become capital of culture seems to have been that it needed to pay more attention to these relationships.

The Local Development Plan is a land-use plan for the city but it has wider implications for the wider metropolitan area and for Wales as a whole. The role of the Spatial Plan is to set out guidance on these issues. This includes cultural issues as well as economic identity.

The LDP can also have an influence on urban design and the visual character of Cardiff. Sue suggested that urban design is critically important. An aspect of this issue is the approach taken towards iconic building – what do Cardiff's icons do for the rest of Wales? What's the role of quality buildings? Cardiff has the ability to take the lead in demonstrating good urban design in the local urban environment.

The LDP needs also to address the challenge of climate change and the sustainability agenda. Cardiff could take a lead here too. Climate change is not something we can forget about until 2050, but an issue now. We need to consider economic, social and physical approaches to adaptation. Cardiff could take a lead on the adaptation agenda. There are questions here that politicians need to be asked. If the costs of food supplies and transport costs rise there will be critical issues for the city and its approach to land use.

Social inclusion is another key issue: we should ensure that no one is left behind. Yet there is a social dislocation between south Cardiff, the city centre and the north of the city.

House-building has developed recently in a way that has produced social polarisation. The aim should be to provide for a mix of house types to meet different needs. Can we create sustainable communities within the city? Can we respect the different community layers that contribute to local identity?

Finally she emphasised the importance of river corridors and green corridors. The Reservoirs Action Group argues that this should be the next green corridor for Cardiff, linking strategically with Caerphilly and our neighbours. This visual green quality was a huge opportunity.

Questions to Sue Essex

What should the Assembly's stance be towards the questions posed by Sue, for example in defining Cardiff's role in relation to the rest of Wales?

Sue responded that this question has often been ducked and opinions seem polarised. There is a tension between those who think that growth along the M4 corridor should reflect the market and those who feel that we should try to ensure the Assembly should try to spread opportunity around Wales. It's this second point of view that holds sway in the Assembly. But we should not neglect the problems within Cardiff: there are wards with severe rates of deprivation and serious problems with health funding, for example. Tensions often emerge over local government settlements – when Cardiff sometimes claims it is not being recognised as the capital. People from outside Cardiff can legitimately point to the millions poured into the regeneration of the Bay. Politicians have difficult decisions to make; Wales is a very small region by European standards. The Spatial Plan tries to resolve some of these issues. Sue argued that there has been insufficient attention to the role of Cardiff and its relationship to Wales and the south-west. But Cardiff itself has also ebbed and flowed in its interest in a collaboration agenda. As a planner she had always been very pro collaboration between Cardiff and the Valleys – which respects their historic relationship. But not every local politician in Cardiff has taken this point of view and this has turned off other politicians concerned for their patches.

The idea of Cardiff Bay was trickle down – an imported Friedmanite idea. We know this doesn't happen; other areas need intervention by government. The debate about Cardiff is happening in the spatial plan but not publicly and people in Cardiff still don't really understand the city's role. Of course, people in the north think people in the Valleys get everything!

Reflecting on investment in Cardiff Bay – how could regeneration be better done and have more impact on the local community?

The model used in Cardiff Bay was the London Docklands model. This had little to do with the real Cardiff. Sue suggested that there was an interesting question about identity and how identity can be the basis of regeneration. She used to have rows with Geoffrey Inkin (Chair of the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation) because he pursued the Docklands model of raising land values and opening up to the market. The Bay's development happened at a fortunate time in view of growth in market values but insufficient attention was paid to mixed land use and community needs. Highways were poorly designed – functioning as barriers between communities rather than as forces of integration. The Butetown History Group had done a fantastic job in saving the history of this place, which was a wonderful and vibrant multinational community but development in the Bay had lost contact with the continuum of change in Cardiff, which is a wonderful story, and the story she had tried to tell today. Such a story helps to establish our identity, to understand where we've come from and why. Development in the Bay has ignored this history. Mermaid Quay is an example – think of how it destroyed what was there before. Not everything is bad. Some things worked well – for example the tunnel for the Bay link. But some things were lost in the regeneration and there is still a divide – the right and the wrong side of the tracks.

The Cardiff Local Development Plan

Stuart Williams (Strategic Planning Group Leader, Cardiff County Council)

Stuart Williams's talk is provided as a presentation in PowerPoint and Acrobat formats.

In brief, he explained the role of the plan in the context of legislation and government guidance. Key principles included the need for the council to engage with the community and stakeholders and to develop a plan that was evidence-based and sustainability-tested. He explained the process underlying the consultation on the Preferred Strategy, undertaken from Autumn 2007.

The plan's vision was "to ensure Cardiff is a world class European capital city with an exceptional quality of life and at the heart of a competitive city region". Key objectives related to housing, transport, employment, regeneration, green spaces, and sustainability. Housing growth scenarios were explained; however, the deposit draft plan, as a result of a council decision, would adopt a higher growth scenario than the planners had proposed. The strategy for employment land was also explained, together with the proposal for a new business park at J33 on the M4. This addressed a proposal in the Wales Spatial Plan and was the outcome of a study undertaken with other authorities in the region.

Other aspects of the Preferred Strategy on which Stuart focused were transport and green belt. He also explained its conservation and environmental approaches, including the requirement to tackle climate change issues.

The timetable for progress with the plan, leading up to adoption in 2011, was outlined.

What future for Cardiff? The urban design questions

John Punter (Cardiff University)

John Punter's talk is presented in PowerPoint and Acrobat formats. Key points are summarised here.

A key theme was the need for more opportunities to debate the future of Cardiff – this would be an important democratic exercise. He warned that his talk would sound critical of the LDP. However, it was in many ways a good piece of work and the process was to be welcomed – and engaged with. While there had been a failure over the past fourteen years to produce an up-to-date land use plan for Cardiff, *this* plan would be delivered.

Key features of the Preferred Strategy demanded interrogation: its focus was on a high-rise city south of the railway tracks, with no green field extensions or suburban development. Given the state of housing need, the plan was inadequate in its approach to family home and affordable homes. The Strategy would produce a socially unbalanced city for which no one had voted, and was likely to encourage inappropriate types of urban form. While the planners had proposed some green field housing, offering a better mix of types and tenures, and offering some gain in sustainability terms,

politicians had rejected green field development, and demanded a higher housing figure whose implications would be that Cardiff was being offered yet more small apartments rather than family homes. This would be a less sustainable strategy offering no infrastructure gains.

Cardiff was becoming polarised into two, or three, cities. Most new development had been to very high density and had taken the form of gated communities. Punter questioned why the council was shying away from new suburban extensions; why no new neighbourhoods were proposed; why there was no effort to construct carbon-neutral communities.

South Cardiff faced a future of higher densities, towers and gated projects – following the market rather than planning for genuine residential and employment needs. He criticised the urban form favoured by the apartment builders – a form that mitigated against a sense of community and neighbourhood. There had been little effort to build new streets – the record of design in the Bay was poor and was creating a social apartheid with the area polarised between deprived families who lacked decent community facilities, and the wealthy behind their gates and walls.

Punter looked at the option to create urban extensions that were well related to transport infrastructure, could meet family housing needs while providing for a social mix and a mix of uses. The J33 business park could be the hub for such a new community – or it could be an isolated, unsustainable traffic magnet. He also considered the positive aspects of suburban intensification and rejected a knee-jerk reaction to such proposals. There was a potential also for the city to sponsor carbon-neutral development projects, but there seemed to be little interest in this opportunity.

Would the LDP enable Cardiff to attain a reputation for high quality and iconic urban design or was it building in the Bay a second high-rise city that would be a ghetto for apartment dwellers? Could the community evolve an alliance which would enable these issues to be properly debated before it was too late?

Question and answer

The morning session concluded with discussion of some of the issues flowing from the LDP presentations.

How far for, example, were the assumptions within the agreed framework questionable in the light of changing economic circumstances? How far had the council altered its proposals in response to consultation? Stuart Williams referred to discussions over the delivery agreement and stakeholder workshops held in relation to the Preferred Strategy. Consultation on the latter had been reported to the city executive and the consultation report would be published at deposit stage. There had, for instance, been a response on housing figures in response to house builders

Had we learned anything from the failure of 1960s high rise development?

John Punter pointed out that post war high rise was very different to present model. It had had Modernist ideals but had not been well built or maintained and thus stigmatised the high rise residential model for generations. Only now had this returned as new form of living in private sector. Its advent in Cardiff was driven by world city thinking and fantastic lifestyle marketing but in practice it amounted to the same mistakes the 1960s had made. High rise can work well in city centres but in Cardiff the market had responded to buy-to-let demand as much as the owner-occupier and built blocks of development that lacked communal facilities and communal space. They were poor in

quality and likely to become a big management headache. They failed to meet a cross-section of housing needs. With the recession it was likely that vacancy rates were high – elsewhere similar developments were reporting a 60-80 percent vacancy rate.

AFTERNOON SESSION

GROUP OUTPUTS

The conference divided into two groups, with some thirty people in each. Groups were asked to:

- Identify priority issues, threats and opportunities facing the city
- Consider how the city and the third sector could work more effectively together
- Consider how the third sector could itself become more effective

Group 1

This group identified a need for a debate about the city's economic motors. Development had been housing led but the focus had been on apartments. Concern was registered about the impact of commuting, which would increase if new family housing were to be located outside the city. These issues were linked to a questioning of the city's economic models. How sustainable were the city's proposals in its Local Plan? Was its provision for housing unbalanced? Was there a choice between dispersed and concentrated models of development?

If the third sector and the city were to work better together the local authority needed to speak in jargon-free language, and to be more transparent in its processes. It needed to recognise that formal consultation did not amount to involvement, and that the outcomes from dialogue with third sector partners needed to be visible. Participants questioned how the council understood the term "stakeholder". There needed to be a clear schedule of meetings and more thought was required about how public awareness and dialogue could be undertaken constructively.

The third sector also needed to think about how it operated. Links between civic societies were ad hoc. Groups in Cardiff needed to examine whether there were lessons from elsewhere which could provide models of joint working, especially on planning issues. The Neighbourhood Planning Network in Bristol was cited as a nearby example. Cardiff groups needed to ensure they were fit for purpose and could respond to issues as they arose. Digital communication could facilitate this. There was a need to be proactive in engaging in debate with the planning authority.

Group 2

One of the problems of the city region was the fact that more than one planning authority was involved. This compromised transport planning, for example. The city badly needed an integrated transport system, including radial road and rail routes, better park and ride facilities and affordable public transport. Planning was felt to have been developer led, and influenced by a boosterist agenda that derived from an inflated sense of the city's importance. There was a need for quality not quantity and for a closer match between planning and community aspirations and needs.

The group expressed concern with the dominance of high-rise apartments and believed that the policies allowing this form of development should be revisited. Much development ignored Cardiff's character. Development should enhance/create communities; currently it was failing to achieve this

goal. Supplementary Planning Guidance was needed on brown field development and suburban intensification.

There was a distrust of the political style cultivated by the city council and this was felt to be a barrier to dialogue and partnership. There was also a belief that if future generations were to participate as active citizens in shaping tomorrow's communities there needed to be a greater emphasis on built environment education. There was a suggestion that council-led think tanks could enable proactive engagement between planning authority and community interests; the city could be innovatory from this point of view but was currently only doing what it had to do as far as consultation was concerned.

If civic societies could work together they would be more likely to be listened to; if they could work together they could also address the bigger picture rather than more localised issues. There was a desire for further joint events. Communications might be aided via a newsletter. The third sector would also be more effective if it could bridge the gap between professionals and lay people.

Points from groups

In addition to the plenary reports, the outputs from the individual tables were recorded and are summarised here.

Priority issues

There needs to be a coordinated public response to the LDP

The LDP needs a policy on suburban intensification to preclude “garden grabbing”

River corridor areas need proper definition

Pressures on infrastructure include traffic growth and favoured locations for employment opportunities

Construction of the Eastern Link

Provision for pedestrians and cyclists

Integration of transport modes and routes

Congestion

Commuting pressures from the Valleys

As the work force is exported, so the city’s population ages

The high rise city

Hospital closures

Planning is too often developer led

There needs to be more collaborative working within the south-east Wales region to address major infrastructure issues such as a tidal barrage

Lack of interface between transport planners, housing allocations, urban designers and environmentalists

Poor development should not compromise what is unique about Cardiff – for example its green corridors

Boosterism does not reflect the real nature of Cardiff as a city or the needs of its communities

How will Cardiff be an economic motor for the region? Will it house its work force or will they be housed elsewhere? Where should economic development go?

Should we encourage or dampen the city’s growth?

Environmental issues are paramount

There need to be initiatives for low income groups, not stasis

Cardiff is sticking to an old model of regeneration through growth – planning is premised on flawed economic models

Greater distribution is needed and the spatial needs of the population addressed to a better minimum standard

WAG's business park may need to be remodelled, but still needs to be sited at a transport hub

Working with the city

The public are alienated from the planning process

More community engagement is needed

Does feedback within the consultation process impact on outcomes? Is engagement real?

Community responses tend to be late and based on objections; community input needs to be constructive and proactive.

Community engagement should be less reactive and less Nimbyist

We need more events of this sort

We need more open meetings and better publicity for meetings organised by the council

Council officers need to be readier to engage and explain and should be proactive in this

Community groups need to do more awareness raising.

Cardiff Civic Society could improve awareness of its work.

The Neighbourhood Planning Network in Bristol was set up by Bristol Civic Society to engage communities and guide the council

An agency is needed to keep up to date with the planning and development process and encourage local engagement and understanding

WAG's stakeholder guidance tends to produce formalistic engagement with consultees

Awareness of the procedures needs to be raised on both sides

Civic Societies need to engage proactively with this process

It is the council's plan – how far is it influenced by party line politics

Are community responses ignored? More publicity needs to be given to consultation outcomes and responses.

We need expertise to help us engage with the council

Working together

Civic societies need to be less neutral in their input into the planning process

WAG pressures the council to prepare plans faster and consult for longer – communities need to respond proactively to this context

Community working can be structured on more than one level but we need to consider and share thoughts on strategic issues

They lay and professional gap needs to be bridged

We need better links with other environmental groups, for example social groups such as the sustainable food markets and other community schemes.

We need to break down jargon and communicate effectively amongst ourselves in order to be able both to articulate a vision and engage in policy debate

The Bristol NPN is a self-help planning organisation bringing fourteen groups together.

We need to play the system.