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Key issues in planning implementation

John L.Taylor and Martin G.Wynn

Abstract

One of the truisms that most planners adhere to is the notion that 'planning is a continuous process'. What is also true, but often more difficult for planners to grasp, is the fact that the process itself is evolutionary and that within this dynamic of change it is not only the system which changes but the values underlying that system as well.

Introduction

A brief look at most of the European planning systems demonstrates that there is often a substantial time lag between changes in the value system and a response from the planning process. The reason can be broadly attributed to two main causes. First, planning systems tend to involve a considerable degree of sophistication and commitment from professionals. Consequently, these systems have their own momentum which tends to militate against the adoption of concepts of flexibility and adaptability to change. Second, while the community is both producer of the need for planning and consumer of the end result, plans themselves are necessarily produced by specialists who *may* not apply a value system that would be shared by the majority of the community.

In essence, it can be contended that the last 40 years of planning in the UK, and particularly the last decade, have demonstrated some of the major difficulties of both building and running a coherent planning system. It is suggested that the lessons that can be gained from this experience can be of value to those working in urban management and planning implementation fields in the developed and developing worlds.

Historical Context

The post-war UK system, as embodied in the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, was a response both to the devastation of the second world war and to a desire to create a new order and a sense of equity in UK society. Plans were seen in engineering terms as models of an ideal which, given time, would be realized. Legislation gave teeth to a system which it was assumed would be good for the public. Underlying the system was a desire for better environmental standards and a belief that such standards could only be achieved by separating work areas from residential areas, a polarization which was to be effected at both the urban level, with cities as workplaces and suburbs providing housing, and at a local level with the grouping and segregation of land use activities. While the preparation of plans was recognized as a function of local government, central government held control powers with respect to strategies and priorities through a system of approval and allocation of finance.

Three main consequences stemmed from this system. First, there was an increasing awareness that planning is descriptive rather than prescriptive, and particularly in the private sector, has limited power to direct the allocation of resources. Second, the concentration on zoning planning had led to an emphasis on the spatial aspects of

planning to the detriment of proper consideration of non-spatial elements. Third, resources were largely directed away from existing urban centres into new housing and industrial areas in surburban zones and the new towns.

After a rash of central area redevelop- ment in the 1960s led by private enterprise, central government responded by recommending that there should be closer cooperation between the public and private sectors. Government decreed that it was proper for local authorities to enter into 'partnership' agreements with private developers to ensure the proper planning and development of their areas. A further attempt was made to separate strategic issues from detailed issues by the introduction of a two-tier planning system with structure plans and local plans. Finally, in 1974, local government was reorganized, ostensibly to recognize the increasing importance of the relationship between urban and rural areas.

The planning profession in the 1970s sought greater sophistication in line with the aspirations of the amended planning system. Structure plans, with their emphasis on broad strategy, became more and more elaborate with less and less relevance to events at local authority level; two-tier government became more complex and bureaucratic and less effective where, as in many instances, strategic responsibilities became divorced from implementation needs.

Meanwhile, public values and concern had shifted. There was a reaction against the large and complex; concern developed about the erosion of the environment; the public questioned both the values and techniques of the planner and demanded to be involved in the process; the emphasis shifted to the small scale, and to immediate incremental changes.

The suspicions and doubts the public expressed about the planning process were reinforced in the mid-1970s by the energy crisis, the slump in population growth and the economic recession. Planning was forced into a more modest framework of conservation of the environment and resources, a more sensitive management of change, and a greater responsiveness to public values and priorities.

Moves towards stringency in the public sector have been furthered in the 1980s as the economic recession has deepened. The only striking initiatives at the local level have been the introduction of enterprise zones, in which planning regulations have been relaxed and economic incentives to developers introduced in an attempt to regenerate run-down urban areas, and new partnership agreements and urban management bodies which have been created to address the problems of the inner cities.

A synoptic view of planning

The significance of the post-war UK experience is that a number of models have evolved which at the time seemed pertinent but quickly lacked relevance as both priorities and resources changed. The models vary in complexity and in their response to evolving policy objectives, but they may be compared and contrasted with planning systems in other countries at different stages of development.

At the risk of gross oversimplification, years of learning can be summarized by a grid of key words and phrases related to major changes of attitudes and approach (Table 1). Throughout the evolution of the models portrayed in the grid, there has been a discernible shift from the immediate post-war view of substantial gain for a limited section of the community to more limited gains for a broader cross section. We are now in the process

of a swinging back of the pendulum to the narrower view benefiting a more limited section of the community. Nevertheless, a more egalitarian view of planning has generally prevailed, having been largely forced upon the planning profession by a realization that planning itself cannot command an assured resource base, and that the strength of this base and its openness to direction by the planning system will be major factors in determining the extent to which planning objectives are implemented. Coupled with this realization has been a public reaction against planners channelling limited resources to benefit small sectors of the community, which has resulted in a general assertion of public values and a demand for projects which distribute benefits more broadly.

Critical issues in urban management and plan implementation

For any plan to be carried successfully through the process of implementation it must perform satisfactorily in a number of areas. Experience to date suggests that the following factors should be of major concern to those concerned with building planning institutions and formulating policy goals:

- Public support and commitment are essential in the long term. As planners have learned to their cost, public involvement is not a rubber stamp operation at the end of the planning process but an essential part of the plan formulation process, concerned with the allocation of resources and development of priorities and objectives as well as the actual policy formulation.

- Policy options and review processes are therefore integral elements in the initial preparation of proposals, and enable the alternative courses of action to be assessed while developing preferred options. Within this process is the iterative cycle of maximizing benefits, which will link directly to the experience gained from previous plan implementation.

- Political support is the essential muscle through which proposals will be realized. While politicians are, to some extent, dependent upon the public for support, the nature of the political system usually means that local politics and public opinion are detached from central government decision making. Political support is thus not synonymous with public support.

- Financial support and organization and their integration into the plan proposals create both a sense of realism which will promote implementation and a momentum which will aid political support. The obvious danger is the difficulty of balancing financial gain with broader social and physical planning gains. Similar difficulties result from a mismatch between aspirations and capabilities.

- Administrative complexity is a characteristic of the planning process in general which, if allowed to proliferate, inevitably reduces the degree of accountability within proposals, and erodes the basis for confidence in their ultimate implementation. However, the nature of the different public and private agencies involved at technical, financial and political levels in the preparation and implementation of plan proposals means that a certain degree of complexity is inevitable.
- Timing, phasing and impact need to be very carefully developed as part of the interventionist's strategy of plan implementation; through guiding and controlling growth and change as a continuous process, and not merely as stages leading to

an ideal end state. An essential element of this strategy is the development of clear policies for controlling development.

Aspects of plan preparation	Early 1950s model	Late 1960s model	Early 1970s model	Late 1970s model
Scale	Uniform	Variable	Variable	Small
Emphasis	Zoning	Inter-relationships	Profitability	Social benefit
Technique	Engineers model	Mathematical models	Architectural	Architectural/community development
Rules	Implicit	Implicit	Implicit	Explicit
Fit	Tight	Loose	Loose	Open-ended
Trade-offs	None	Some	Substantial in theory	Acknowledged without precision
Aspects of plan Implementation				
Scale	Variable	Variable	Large	Small
Emphasis	Land use	Environment	Profitability	Total environment
Technique	Development control	Development control	Partnerships	Planning brief
Rules	Explicit	Implicit	Implicit	Explicit
Fit	Loose	Loose	Loose	Flexible
Trade-offs	None	Some	Substantial	Medium
Feedback	None	None	Negative	Positive

TABLE 1 Changing emphasis in UK plan preparation and implementation.

National perspective and dynamic

Given that the preceding remarks are gross simplifications, it is possible to continue in the same vein and suggest that if we have had any success in local planning in the UK it has to be related to five main factors.

(1) The extent of the UK planning experience. Much has been tried a good deal has been disregarded, many revisions have been introduced (often to be further refined).

(2) The strength of the legal system, its interpretation, acceptance and enforcement. Clearly the UK legislative code provides a very comprehensive underpinning to planning activity and places in the hands of local authorities wide discretionary powers that considerably restrict the property rights of the individual. In addition the system has certain built-in checks and safeguards which ensure that justice is not only done but seen to be done, and that discretionary powers are not used arbitrarily.

(3) The manpower commitment and strength of the machinery of government. Some measure of this resource base can be gained from the following statistics: some 20,000 people are engaged in local government planning; approaching half a million planning applications are handled per year; almost 5 000 appeals are resolved in any 12-month period.

(4) The balance being struck between public good and personal interest. It is accepted that society is not monolithic but pluralistic. 'Conflicts' and 'trade-offs' are widely recognized and political choice is fairly generally accepted as a necessary resolutionary expedient. In short, the UK has almost come to accept some form of land nationalization but at the same time values certain aspects of the free enterprise system. The power of the state has slowly been extended over time as weaknesses or failures in the market economy system have been revealed and politically acknowledged. This power is only tolerated as long as planning can demonstrate that it is achieving something worthwhile.

Hence the planners have been encouraged to be more explicit about their role and much more flexible and adaptable in the performance of their responsibilities.

(5) The willingness of both planners and the public to be more and more ware of weaknesses in the system; i.e the fact that decision making rarely bears the hallmark of rationality! It is widely recognized that sometimes ideals have to be sacrificed; planning is seen as an adaptive process requiring suboptimization as well as flexibility. In short, there appears a greater willingness to learn how to learn. However, mistakes are not acknowledged until an adequate response to error signals can be formulated. In planning, perhaps more than any other sphere in the UK, fresh legislation, new administrative arrangements and innovative inducements are tried and tested with astounding rapidity. All this is to say that planning retains a certain degree of credibility, and the political will to control and plan is not lacking.

Concluding remarks

This article opened by stating that planning is a continuous process and that it is evolutionary by nature. The patterns and rates of change will vary from country to country but it is likely that certain critical problem areas will be found to be common to many countries. Unfortunately, planners have been reluctant to examine systematically their past performance to see what lessons can be learned and passed on locally or internationally. Yet this examination and consideration of past performance has an essential role to play as a means of improving performance, developing training methods and exchanging experience both nationally and internationally.

Much remains to be done in precisely defining the planning and related training requirements in developing nations, but, as in this article, certain key issues can often be identified. Clearly, some governments find that policy implementation is often hampered by the inadequacy or virtual non-existence of what can be termed 'quaternary infrastructure', i.e. administrative, technical and professional institutions where the planning system can be viewed as a central component.

In developed countries, this 'quartenary infrastructure' may take several generations of trial and error to devise and refine if judged by the post-war UK experience. Comparable machinery cannot be built up overnight. Nevertheless, developing nations are likely to welcome mechanisms that will improve their learning rates and at the same time avoid constantly having to re-invent the wheel. Knowledge of the planning and implementation issues discussed above may help others working in different decision making environments confront their own particular challenges with greater confidence in the future.

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