

Plan The World We Need

The role of planning in a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery in Wales

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The planning system has a vital role to play in the development of the places we live, work and enjoy. Particularly at this time of uncertainty, planners and the planning system are well placed to support the recovery by encouraging a positive, collaborative, and integrated approach.

At this critical stage in the recovery, we need a strong, proactive and planned system to help communities and businesses navigate through uncertain times and to direct economic stimulus measures towards place-based interventions, which deliver multiple benefits.

To address the climate and ecological crisis, we need planning to support the rapid transition to net zero carbon and reverse patterns of habitat and biodiversity loss. New development must be located and built in ways that achieve carbon neutrality, in both embodied and operational emissions, with upfront provision of the necessary transport, utilities and green infrastructure.

Masterplans, created by well-resourced and multi-skilled teams, can be implemented by a diverse range of private and public sector-led developers, including SMEs, self and custom builders.

Areas of Wales have traditionally faced complex place-based issues, such as a decline in economic growth, changes in our high streets, delivery of sustainable transport, poverty and inequality, supporting and encouraging the Welsh language, clean energy generation and distribution and quality housing in the right locations. While there are many uncertainties around how we will emerge from the pandemic, it is likely that many of these issues will be compounded.

RTPI Cymru believes the approach needed towards a balanced recovery must:

- Make decisions for the long term, based on sound and transparent evidence, integrating objectives, strategies and plans;
- Build on positive behavioural change and environmental improvements, with a long term focus on climate action;
- Adopt a focused partnership approach;
- Ensure a framework which enables the prioritisation of appropriate investment;
- Provide clear quality standards in the short term, for long term benefits; and
- Ensure appropriate resourcing for planning to do its job.

Make decisions for the long term, based on sound and transparent evidence, integrating objectives, strategies and plans

Wales has a strong legislative framework in place with the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015), Planning (Wales) Act 2015, Environment (Wales) Act 2015 and the Active Travel Act (2013).

As a priority, the National Development Framework (NDF) is required to provide a much needed framework to strategically guide development in Wales. It will have an important role to play in identifying infrastructure projects at a time where there is uncertainty around the future of planned projects, infrastructure finance and as Britain leaves the European Union. Equally, bringing forward Strategic Development Plans (SDPs) at a regional level will enable us to address the more complex regional spatial issues that cross boundaries and may require different responses across Wales. This strong plan framework is vital to the balanced recovery of Wales.

Spatial planning can positively support the economic performance of Wales through influencing factors that determine productivity, by defining the future role of key settlements and strengthening their interrelationships, by providing enhanced connectivity etc. Welsh Government have recognised the importance of supporting “the shift to a place-based economic policy”, and this is a shift which we particularly welcome.

It is important to recognise the spatial distinctiveness of places in developing economic policy. At the national level, it will be the NDF which can facilitate an integrated approach with other areas of policy, linking decisions on economic development with those on housing, climate change, energy generation, transport, and other infrastructure, providing a spatial framework for investment.

It will be important in achieving effective integration and ensuring alignment with spatial plans at the appropriate level of the spatial hierarchy. This needs to include the emerging SDPs at the regional level, the well-established Local Development Plans (LDPs) within local authorities, and Place Plans for those communities which have them. The policy framework would be strengthened by emphasising the importance of these links and the use of the evidence that they provide.

A strong plan framework will facilitate integration across sectors, for example housing, health and transport and should also be used to plan investment, to encourage joint working and maximise benefits on the ground.

Build on positive behavioural change and environmental improvements, with a long term focus on climate action

While there are many questions and discussions to be had, there are also many certainties and priorities that must not be overlooked in responding to the pandemic, such as long term sustainability goals, including climate change. These issues must remain priorities and at the forefront of planning for the future in Wales.

We need to recognise the importance for our economic future in responding to the environmental challenges represented by the climate emergency. Aligning with other policies on this key area of concern for our future is of equally critical importance.

The positive behavioural changes adopted as a result of the pandemic by the public, including more walking and cycling and an appreciation of green space and biodiversity, must influence the way that we approach climate change adaptation, mitigation and investment. We urge Welsh Government to be bold in its approach to integrating responses to climate change into its policy frameworks for addressing the recovery.

Adopt a focused partnership approach

RTPI Cymru believes that a confident and proactive approach is required by all stakeholders across all sectors, including Government, policy and decision makers, planners and communities alike, to achieve the balanced recovery required, following the pandemic.

There are many uncertainties that require cross-sectoral discussion and partnership working, such as the recovery of our high streets and the place based inequalities which have been highlighted during the pandemic.

Planners have an important proactive role as a driver of change, but collaborative working is needed across sectors, business and communities, with funding in place to support this.

The importance of integration within our communities has been demonstrated during the pandemic. Despite the significant amount of research, data and reports available on this subject, greater attention must be paid to integration with local services, open space, recreation etc. Some towns and cities, both in Wales and beyond, are already responding to the changes in behaviour with open space and active travel initiatives, that favour pedestrians and cyclists above vehicles. Collaborative working across business, communities and sectors is required to find solutions and positive outcomes. A partnership approach, along with integrated plans and strategies will help strengthen and build resilience for the future.

Ensure a framework which enables the prioritisation of appropriate investment

We believe that investment in infrastructure is fundamental to many of the issues we are currently facing. The response to the pandemic may mean some early repurposing of funds. However it will be important for programmes of investment at the national level to fit within the spatial framework provided by the NDF (once adopted) and at the regional level to be aligned with SDPs and LDPs.

Strategic plans must provide the land, infrastructure and housing to support the businesses and industries that can deliver growth in a zero-carbon, circular economy. Importantly, the plans provide coordinated, evidence based direction to investment decisions.

While there is still a need for more housing, we also need greater emphasis on the renewal, repurposing and retrofit of existing buildings. They must be integrated with plans to retrofit our existing stock and regenerate neighbourhoods, enabling healthy and fulfilling lives.

Different areas across Wales will require different policy responses to their local economies, affordable housing, local shops and services, schools, transport and community facilities. Sharing of good practice is particularly encouraged.

Provide clear quality standards in the short term, for long term benefits

We must recognise the significant change in behaviour that the pandemic has brought about, for example, the way we view and use outdoor space and active travel provisions, and the contribution these now make to so many of our lives. This highlights the importance of retaining and improving quality, standards and access to such provisions.

It is vital that our initial response to the pandemic does not overlook existing good work and that we retain quality and standards in the short term, for long term benefits, for example not compromising the quality and design of development to achieve short term fixes. The Placemaking Charter Wales will provide a useful focus in this respect, promoting the important principles of placemaking - people and community, location, movement, mix of uses, public realm and identity.

Ensure appropriate resourcing for planning to do its job

Most local planning authorities have lost significant capacity in recent years. Support for planning authorities would improve integration and mitigate risks around projects requiring planning consent.

Strengthening the delivery of the planning system with investment in digital infrastructure, guidance and shared learning around virtual working and engagement would support planners in operating an efficient virtual planning system.

A well resourced, plan-led, positive planning service can deliver corporate objectives, which, if properly encouraged and effectively organised can bring together objectives across services and help achieve local and national sustainable development and climate action goals. Corporate management teams provide leadership, vision and priority setting for areas, by shaping the strategic operational direction and investment decisions of local authorities. The implications of these corporate decisions on new investment, infrastructure, development activity, local services and policy delivery are significant, particularly at this time. The RTPI believes that making the [role of the Chief Planning Officers](#) a more prominent and strategic position within local authorities would positively influence the outcomes of planning and support good growth and a balanced recovery.

While some have called for a relaxation of planning regulations in the short term, as a response to the economic issues caused by the pandemic, we do not believe this is the answer to the very complex issues we are likely to encounter. We believe the relaxation of planning regulations would be detrimental to quality and standards and at a time when these need to be maintained and enhanced to meet our future needs. It would also take away the opportunity to consider the impact of development in the longer term and as part of a wider picture, at a time when our planning responses require creative thinking and partnership work.

Further information on the RTPI's thoughts on how planning can contribute to calls for a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the current health and economic crisis can be found on our website, including our Research Paper: [Plan the World We Need](#).

The RTPI's Coronavirus hub is supporting members during the current pandemic www.rtpi.org.uk/news/coronavirus-hub/

We would like to thank the members of the RTPI Cymru Policy and Research Forum who contributed to the ideas in this paper.

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

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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 and environmental challenges. We are the only body in the United Kingdom that confers Chartered status to planners, the highest professional qualification sought after by employers in both private and public sectors.