

ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Date: Wednesday 14 November 2001
Time: 2:00 pm to 4:30 pm
Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly for Wales

Attendance:

EPT Committee Members:

Richard Edwards, Chair	Preseli Pembrokeshire
Eleanor Burnham	North Wales
David Davies	Monmouth
Geraint Davies	Rhondda
Sue Essex, Minister for Environment	Cardiff North
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn and Deeside
Karen Sinclair	Clwyd South
Rhodri Glyn Thomas	Carmarthen East and Dinefwr

Officials:

Martin Evans	Director of Transport, Planning and Environment Group
Bob Macey (item 2)	Head of Environmental Policy Division
Lyn Owen (item 3)	Planning Division

In Attendance:

Jonathan Adams (item 3)	Design Steering Group
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Tom Cassidy (item 4)	Chief Executive, Cadw
Richard Avent (item 4)	Head of Inspectorate, Cadw
Douglas Hogg (item 4)	Chief Architect, Cadw
Andrew Hood (item 4)	Head of Presentation, Cadw

Secretariat:

Siwan Davies	Committee Clerk
Vaughan Watkin	Deputy Committee Clerk

Opening Remarks from Chair

0.1 The Chair welcomed members, officials and members of the public to the meeting.

Item 1: Apologies, substitutions and declaration of interests

1.1 Apologies had been received from Helen Mary Jones and John Griffiths.

1.2 The Chair invited members to declare any interests under Standing Order 4.5. Geraint Davies declared that he was a member of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council.

Item 2: Report from the Minister for the Environment – EPT-16-01 (p 1)

2.1 In addition to the items in the report, the Minister updated the Committee on the following issues:

- Flooding – the report on flooding had been deferred until the New Year to take account of the forthcoming DEFRA consultation on flood defence funding in England and Wales. The Minister was already working with the Environment Agency and Flood Defence Committee Wales on simplifying funding mechanisms;
- Glas Cymru – there was widespread welcome for reinvestment of £41 million savings in improving services for customers, which had been made possible by the new ownership structure.

1. The following points were raised in discussion:

- Water quality – Members expressed concern at the fall in the quality of some Welsh rivers and bathing waters, particularly in North Wales. Overall there had been an improvement in water quality, but some areas were still experiencing difficulties. A briefing note had been circulated explaining the drop in the number of Blue Flag Awards for 2001, and Members welcomed the fact that the causes were to be explored further.
- Marine and Wildlife Conservation Bill – if the bill were to reach the statute book it would place a duty on the National Assembly to designate and protect new conservation sites;
- EC Regulation on refrigerators – concern remained about the EU legislation preventing the export of reconditioned refrigerators from EU Member States, which raised issues about disposal. The Minister confirmed she was looking into the impact for Wales, particularly for Local Authorities, and officials were liaising with DEFRA who had the UK lead responsibility;
- Incineration of waste – the Minister had discussed concerns about incineration with Baroness Young, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency. The Environment Agency was committed to playing a full role in making and implementing the Wales Waste Strategy;
- Railtrack successor – the Committee expressed the need for strong Welsh representation on the board of the successor body. Significant long term investment was needed, and it was hoped that many improvements could be delivered as part of the new Wales and Borders franchise. The Committee would invite the successor to Railtrack and the new franchise holder to a future meeting;
- Road safety – Members welcomed the ring-fenced funding for local authority Child Pedestrian Co-ordinators, and stressed the need for continued investment in future years.

Item 3: Establishment of the Design Commission for Wales –

EPT-16-01 (p 2)

3.1 Introducing the paper, Sue Essex said the Design Commission was the way forward for improving design standards in Wales. Jonathan Adams of the Design Steering Group gave his perceptions of Design Commission for Wales (copy attached at annex 1).

3.2 Members welcomed the establishment of the Design Commission for Wales and discussion focused on the following aspects:

- Membership – the Commission would be appointed by the National Assembly and membership would cover a wide range of professional interests in the design field;
- Influence – the Design Commission would not have a statutory role, but would champion high standards of design and architecture through promoting a wider understanding of design. It was suggested that the Design Commission ‘approve’ or ‘award’ good examples of design, particularly for high profile projects, to set the benchmark for best practice;
- Planning – Members stressed the need for the Design Commission to ensure that the planning process took account of design considerations, particularly in rural and conservation areas. There was also a need to address the design skills deficit in local planning authorities. Planning guidance was being revised and a new Design TAN had been issued to local planning authorities, who were able to refuse permission on the grounds of poor design.

Item 4: Cadw – mid term report – EPT-16-01(p 3)

4.1 Introduced the paper Tom Cassidy said that performance had fallen compared to last year due to the impact of the foot and mouth outbreak. All Cadw monuments were now open and the figures for October were more encouraging, the first half of the year now showed a 9% reduction in business, rather than 10% as indicated in the paper.

4.2 Discussion focused on the following areas:

- Regaining the lost visitor market - Cadw was working with the Wales Tourist Board to encourage overseas visitors to visit Wales. Free entry to museums and galleries in Wales may also be contributing to the reduction in visitor numbers;
- Targets – Cadw’s target was to complete the re-survey of listed properties by 2005, but there was no target number of properties and the total was likely to reach 30,000. The Committee felt that Cadw’s targets generally needed to be reviewed, to ensure that they captures the policy element as well as the more operational functions. This would be addressed as part of the current quinquennial review of Cadw, the draft interim report would be discussed in the spring term;
- Partnership with local authorities – Cadw was consulting on the possible delegation of listed building consent to local planning authorities, in line with the procedure in England.

4.3 The Committee agreed with Cadw’s proposal to increase admission prices in line with inflation.

4.4 Future scrutiny sessions would be held annually in the spring prior to the publication of Cadw's corporate plan. Members were also keen to visit one of Cadw's sites to find out more about work on the ground.

Item 5: Minutes of the meeting 31 October - EPT-15-01 (min)

1. The committee adopted the minutes of the meeting held on 31 October.

Date of next meeting

6.1 The next meeting of the committee would be at 2.00 pm on Wednesday 28 November 2001, at the National Assembly for Wales.

Committee Secretariat November 2001

ANNEXE 1

PRESENTATION BY JONATHAN ADAMS - DESIGN STEERING GROUP

It has been widely understood in England for many years, in particular by the metropolitan media, that the quality of building and environmental design in Wales is lower than that of any other region of the UK.

According to the Shell Guide to Wales published in 1971 *"The visitor should remember that in architecture, as other matters, English standards do not apply."*

Adjudicators for the 1999 RIBA awards said *"... if schemes which aren't up to standard get an award it devalues the system. On the other hand its wrong for London to suffer, and I'm more inclined to give Wales's awards to projects in London."*

Earlier this year the Observer newspaper said of Cardiff ' *It is a sad example of a city that, given the choice between the second rate and the excellent has no hesitation in grabbing the former*'

Although this reputation is exaggerated and fundamentally unfair, there is a kernel of truth in it. And to an extent the prejudice has been self-fulfilling.

It is not a coincidence that the economic gap that exists between Wales and the rest of mainland Britain mirrors the disparity in design quality. The erosion of civic values is only one indicator of economic difficulty, but it is a highly visible one. If the gap in design standards is to be closed then, like the gap in GDP, it has to be achieved by Welsh institutions acting on Wales's behalf.

The majority of planning applications in England are determined without direct design advice from the London based Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. However, the high profile of this body and the strong support it receives from the government, have both helped greatly to raise design culture in England to a more sophisticated level.

Just as in Scotland, English based procurers, designers and statutory authorities alike all operate in an environment of greater sensitivity to the value of design excellence. The Whitehall and Scottish governments have made, and are continuing to make, major investments in the cultivation of design consciousness, because they know that it is productive in defining local identity, raising civic pride, generating prosperity and achieving international recognition.

Wales is thought of as a nation blessed with a magnificent landscape but burdened with the scars of insensitive industrialisation. It is a small nation and even its wildest regions are never far from the influence of the urban environment.

At present, and as it has been historically, Wales is vulnerable to short term exploitation. We are expected to embrace all inward investments, particularly in industry and in housing. Commercial investors believe that they have little to gain by setting high standards for their speculative building: short term profit can be made regardless, and without long term interest, the investor is not affected by the consequential degradation. The developers concerned are, along with their financial gains, more often than not located outside of Wales.

Unitary Authorities have difficult targets to achieve for the building of new homes, and all are striving to attract new employment. At present the only stage at which any judgement of design merit can be put into effect is within local authority planning procedures. But the domination of economic factors in the determination of planning applications has led to a widespread atrophy of the skills necessary for making design judgements.

In any case, planning officers are not trained in design, in design theory or history, and typically have no greater interest in design than the average layperson. As a result of the failure of the planning system to uphold design standards we see, again and again, derogatory development permitted to a degree that would be inconceivable in comparable environments in England or Scotland.

Even though the more populated parts of our country are littered with ex-industrial brownfield sites, under the prevailing system, the volume housebuilders find it very easy to avoid building on them, and to obtain access to the highest quality greenfield sites, mature urban locations and even on floodplains instead.

The same lack of constraint, the impossibility of resisting the promise of regeneration investment, whatever compromises are entailed, has resulted in a proliferation of insensitive retail developments, in close proximity to historic urban centres and conservation areas, and at the gateways to all our major towns, with the inevitable consequence that the distinctive character of those environments - the quality that made them recognisably Welsh - is lost.

Quality of life is directly linked to the quality of a community's environment. It is self evident that shoddy or banal environments contribute to unhappy lives. It is equally true that fine environments contribute to healthier, happier lives.

The quality of designed interventions is critical to the preservation of the nation's identity and self-esteem, but until now no agency has existed with a remit across the whole of Wales to ensure that new development enhances that which we already have, and does not degrade it.

There may be a number of strands to the work of our new Design Commission, but at its core there must be an effort to engage and to enlighten the practices of the businesses and public bodies that actually commission new building work, because it is they who define the parameters within which designers can work.

Two years ago, when I became involved with the Institute of Welsh Affairs in raising this debate, it was by no means clear where we, in Wales, stood. Devolution coincided almost exactly with the abolition of the London based Royal Fine Arts Commission, whose reputation had declined under the chairmanship of Lord StJohn of Fawlsey.

It was clear that the old RFAC had included Wales in its remit - although less than 2% of its attention was ever turned in our direction. The RFAC was replaced by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. The new organisation was to be sponsored by DCMS and DTLR, which suggested that Wales would be left to go its own way.

In fact we worked this out before CABE did. Examining the legacy of the RFAC and the ambitious remit of CABE, it was easy to conclude that in this matter as in many others, Wales

would be best served by its own dedicated organisation.

CABE is generously funded by its sponsors, and in the two years of its existence, has already been very successful in getting its voice heard, at a time when new public procurement methods have the potential either to greatly enrich the built environment in England, or, if uncontrolled, to diminish it badly. CABE's role at this time is vital.

The potential for Wales's Design Commission to make a real difference here is greater still. In this respect the relatively small size of our country is an advantage. It would be reasonable to expect it to produce positive results within a decade or less - by this I mean that we should begin to see finer, more sustainable and more distinctive new building taking place: buildings that are faithful to their context but at the same time consistent with the best contemporary design standards.

We ought to expect our Commission perhaps to be more radical and more effective than either its Scottish or English counterparts.

Because so much of our understanding of the identity of other nations is based on the recognition of their distinct building forms, this initiative, perhaps as much as any other, has the potential to raise international awareness of Wales as a distinct nation, and to build upon that into the future.

The funding that the Assembly has already directed to the Commission is hugely welcomed. At the annual conference of the Royal Society of Architects in Wales last week, for example, there was a level of support, enthusiasm and goodwill that has not been felt for any initiative in Wales for many, many years. This support is echoed among the other organisations represented on the National Assembly's Design Initiative Steering Group. With this enthusiasm, of course, comes a high level of expectation.

In the first year of its existence the new body will concentrate its efforts on forging connections, setting its goals, its mode of operation, and the level of funding it requires to be viable. The Assembly will, no doubt, take a supportive attitude to the plans that the Commission sets out. To achieve its potential it will certainly need to be funded to a higher level than those sums currently allocated.

CABE in London receives nearly four million pounds annually. The Scottish Royal Fine Arts Commission - which is itself due for renewal - receives around a tenth of the funding of CABE,

and Scotland has just launched an ambitious new architecture policy, which will require a level of funding well above that which has sustained their Commission since the 1920s. Just as Wales is setting up a Commission for the first time, it appears that the benchmarks are being raised.

If it is to make the necessary difference to Wales, the goal of our Commission should be to match those benchmarks, and to exceed them.