

A Planner's Profile

Blair Melville, Head of Planning Strategy for Homes for Scotland, looks across his experience of both the public and private sectors, highlighting the need for planners to deepen their understanding of the development industry.



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Writing this article reminded me, alarmingly, that I'm in my 30th year as a practicing planner, the last 12 of those involved in housing, both in Local Government and in the private sector. 'Interesting times' doesn't begin to cover the economic circumstances we have to deal with at the moment. That leads me to wonder whether my experience in public and private sectors has equipped me to deal with the economic challenges we all face, while also grappling with the biggest changes to the planning system in my time in the profession.

Planning education

I trained in the 1970s when the academic approach to planning was rooted in sociology and politics. Like many, I saw planning as a profession which could mediate between the market and social and environmental objectives. If I've learned anything since, it is that you have to understand the economic forces you're trying to influence, and I fear that planning education and practice are still lacking. We deal now with the three-legged stool of sustainability; unfortunately, the economic leg of that stool is decidedly 'shoogly' for many of our profession.

New towns and local government

I was fortunate to work firstly in a New Town Development Corporation, with its ethos of promoting development. Of course, New Towns had a distinctive legislative and financial structure which allowed them to be proactive, and it's interesting to see how often the New Towns model is brought up as a way for planning to become once again a promotional rather than a regulatory activity. My subsequent 20 years in Local Government in the Tayside area saw me involved in a variety of policy and implementation work, with a significant involvement in economic policy. In my final years in Perth, I was focussed on housing policy and the process of delivering new strategic sites, so perhaps that combination of experience led me naturally into the housing industry.

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Working across the sectors

My role in Homes for Scotland has been a fascinating view back into Local Government planning. I'm involved in informing, influencing and, where necessary, challenging the public sector approach to planning, seeking to show that the development industry has operating and financial imperatives

which the planning system ignores at the risk of failing to deliver its strategies. The industry's influence within Government has certainly grown in my time in the sector, and I'd like to think I've had some influence on the new system and Scottish planning policy generally – whether all of you think it's been a positive influence may depend on where you work!

That experience has confirmed for me that not enough planners have had the range of public and private sector experience that I've been fortunate enough to enjoy. Homes for Scotland and the Improvement Service have tried to promote secondments, but take-up from the public sector has been poor. The recession has seen some movement from private to public, and anecdotal evidence suggests that some Planning Authorities have gained new perspectives as a result. Whether this is a short-term phenomenon remains to be seen, but I think it's highly regrettable that many public sector planners take a negative view of what their colleagues in the private sector can bring to the planning process.

The challenge and the prize

As we get older, we often see trends come round again. I'm hugely encouraged to see a focus in Government once again on delivering development as part of a sustainable economic development strategy. Scotland can't afford to turn its back on opportunity, especially in these difficult times. Thomas Edison said that "good fortune is what happens when opportunity meets with planning". Perhaps that is both the challenge and the potential prize arising from current conditions – to encourage positively commercial opportunity within a sound planning framework. For some planners, 'culture change' indeed, but a change which as a profession we should embrace, not fear.