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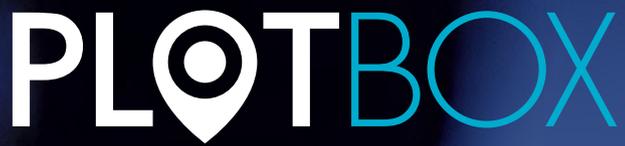
Reviving and repurposing our town and city centres



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Editorial



Paul O'Brien
Chief Executive, APSE

Commission Impossible?

On 25 March I was delighted, as Chair of the APSE Local Government Commission 2030, to bring together my fellow commissioners, for a session with APSE's National Council and invited guests. This was hosted by our National Chair, Cllr Mark Pengelly, and National Secretary, Karen Bradford.

This special Commission event was designed to test our emerging recommendations, based on the plethora of evidence we have received from many people and organisations, both within and out with, local government.

It is fair to say that the initial tranche of evidence gathering made me think at one stage that this could quickly become 'Commission Impossible', as each idea, or issue, raised with the Commissioners set us off on further lines of enquiry. However, what became apparent is the interconnectivity between the erosion of the system of local government in the UK over the past 50 years and the pressure building on the multiple public policy crises communities face.

It is striking that our Commissioners, from diverse professional and political backgrounds, have arrived at an emerging set of recommendations that overrides any individual differences, resulting in an emerging set of sensible recommendations, which we hope will restart the debate about the future of local government, moving towards 2030.

We know that 2030 is by no means an 'end date' but we aim to propose some short, medium and long-term recommendations on fixing our system of local government that will allow us to continue a dialogue and, we hope, influence the future direction of travel in a positive way. We know that we face some 'whataboutery questions' and these will of course be welcome, but I now believe the trajectory of the APSE Local Government Commission 2030 will be about delivering proposals that will, if implemented, reinvigorate the role, powers and resources of councils for the benefit of all within society. So watch this space!

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Creating a future for Wokingham town centre

In 2010 Wokingham Borough Council adopted a Masterplan for its town centre, designed to help revitalise it, bring back footfall and deliver much needed community facilities for all. Having scooped Best Housing, Regeneration or New Build Initiative at the APSE Service Awards 2020, we take a closer look at the wide range of benefits the regeneration is delivering to Wokingham businesses and communities.

As with high streets across the country, Wokingham's town centre was suffering from a lack of investment in facilities and infrastructure alongside wider issues such as high levels of local residential growth, increased internet shopping, business closures and competition from larger neighbours.

The town had also seen several private town centre development schemes fail due to poor financial viability, concerns about overdevelopment of the town and a lack of buy-in from residents and wider businesses.

Recognising that a more strategic approach needed to be taken if the town was to be a success, the Council adopted a Masterplan vision for Wokingham in 2010. This aimed to revitalise the town centre and help ensure it had the ability to adapt and thrive for years to come.

Key objectives and challenges

The key objectives identified in the vision were to:

- Create great public spaces
- Deliver a better retail experience
- Offer people more entertainment and things to do
- Improve sports and leisure facilities
- Improved access and transport to the town
- Support sustainable communities
- Support business and jobs
- Improve architectural quality

In order to ensure the vision was successful and delivered a wide range of benefits for the community, the Council opted to take control and lead the regeneration themselves.

In order to ensure the vision was successful and delivered a wide range of benefits for the community, the Council opted to take control and lead the regeneration themselves.

With the costs of regeneration sitting at circa £125m, the Council recognised the importance of not placing strain on public funds and added a further objective: that the regeneration should be financially viable, not rely on tax payer subsidy and should generate an income stream which could be used to fund essential services across the borough for years to come.

A professional team was pulled together to advise the Council in designing and delivering mixed-use schemes for the three key sites of Peach Place, Elms Field and Carnival.

Proposals for these sites, which included the loss of popular car parks and the redevelopment of a local park and leisure centre, split residents and politicians significantly. This led to active campaigns and a vocal negative public image of the regeneration.

Recognising these concerns, the Council worked closely with a range of core stakeholders, including local civic and community associations, borough and town councillors, businesses and the wider community to bring forward appropriate proposals.



Extensive consultation was undertaken, including multiple public consultations, exhibitions, drop-in sessions, public meetings, and correspondence with local residents and businesses on a regular basis feeding into the designs.

Between 2015 and 2017 the Council submitted and secured detailed planning consent for all three sites which are being developed in phases to minimise the impact of delivery on the town centre. Construction work started on site in 2016 and the final phase is expected to complete in 2022.

Tangible benefits

As the different phases of the project are completed and facilities open, the benefits of the Regeneration for Wokingham are proving substantial for residents, businesses, partners and the Council itself.

New tangible benefits delivered in response to the Masterplan vision objectives include:

- Great public spaces: Large landscaped park and accessible play area, extensive seating and planting, integrated infrastructure for events (power, water, drainage).
- A better retail experience: Improved business mix with national names alongside independent boutiques.
- More entertainment and things to do: Restaurants and cafes with outdoor seating, Everyman Boutique cinema, Premier Inn hotel, Large library with more space for events, Flexible community use including sports hall that converts to a 400 seat performance venue.
- Improved sports and leisure facilities: Larger leisure centre with two pools, splash pad, bigger gym, specialist gym, studios, and four court sports hall.
- Improved access and transport to the town: Improved pedestrianised linkages and crossing points, 529 space multi-storey car park and extensive cycle parking.
- Sustainable communities: Range of new homes including apartments and family homes, key worker apartments to help attract difficult to recruit roles to the area.
- Support for businesses and jobs: 900 new jobs for the town, including 350 in the construction phase and 550 jobs in the new businesses and community facilities.



- Improved architectural quality: Designed to respond to the towns existing architecture, Inclusion of lots of 'green' features to help meet the Council ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030, including solar panels and high-quality glazing.

As developer and landlord, the Council has been able to curate the town centre, using flexibility over rents and terms, to ensure it reflects local aspirations and offers something different to larger neighbours Reading and Bracknell.

This has been achieved by placing a focus on independent and boutique businesses, with many new local start-ups, alongside larger high quality nationals such as GAILs, Oliver Bonas and Waterstones. The units have also allowed several existing small businesses in the town the opportunity to move to a larger unit and expand their offer.

Market interest has been high with the majority of new units already trading, let or under offer, a trend that has continued despite the impact of COVID with over 12 new businesses opening since restrictions were brought in in early 2020. This positivity has had a roll over effect into the wider town centre with privately owned vacant units also being snapped up and very few empty units remaining in the town.

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Income generated

Initial tangible measurements established include income generated, footfall and parking figures and, following the opening of the new leisure centre and library, visitor numbers for these new facilities.

Whilst the Council could sell the commercial asset to generate a one-off profit of circa £44m, the preference is to retain the commercial units to generate an ongoing income of circa £2.8m per year, set to rise to £5m to £6m as the costs of construction are paid off, which can be used to fund essential services across the borough.

Footfall counts taken at the end of 2019 demonstrate the regeneration is having a positive impact on the town with figures showing an increase of circa 10% on pre-project figures from 2016.

A rising profile alongside award recognition

The Council's regeneration work has gained significant interest both locally and nationally helping the borough raise its profile as a great place to live and do business.

Following on from winning a Planning & Placemaking Award in 2016 the project also won the RTPI Excellence in Planning for a Successful Economy award in 2020 and has also been shortlisted as a finalist in the Thames Valley Property Awards, Planning and Placemaking Awards, and for the SPACES Civic Building of the Year 2020. The regeneration was also singled out by the Sunday Times in October 2019 when identifying Wokingham as one of Britain's most thriving communities

What next?

Since starting on the regeneration the Council has been able to develop a strong in-house development and investment team who will be able to take forward similar projects across the borough with less reliance on expensive external consultancy and support. In addition to the Council's traditional projects, the experience gained will also allow the Council to focus in areas such as commercial and residential development which also offer increased opportunities for income generation through use of council assets.

Further information about the regeneration is available on the dedicated project website at: www.regenerationcompany.co.uk



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**



Councils given power to build more homes for first time buyers and for social rent

On 20 March 2021, the Housing Secretary announced new reforms that are designed to give councils in England more freedom on how they spend money from homes sold through Right to Buy. Vickie Hacking, APSE Principal Advisor, provides an overview of the reforms.

In 2012, the Government announced a policy to reinvigorate the Right to Buy. The new policy introduced a significant increase in the discounts available to tenants and in introducing the policy the Government promised that all homes lost would be replaced on a one-for-one basis, nationally.

As part of the reforms, councils had to provide an additional affordable property within three years of receipt of the sale of the Right to Buy home. If the council failed to meet this obligation a proportion of the receipt had to be returned to Central Government.

In addition, the Government only allowed councils to retain Right to Buy receipts where they were able to demonstrate that no more than 30% of the receipts would be used to fund the cost of replacement homes.

Under the terms of the policy, the receipts cannot be combined with grant funding from Homes England, so councils generally needed to find the remaining cash from borrowing or revenue funding.

The Government have stated that the new measures are designed to give councils greater flexibility over the types of homes they provide to reflect the needs of their communities.

The measures introduced

The Government has commented that this set of reforms, combined with the abolition of the borrowing cap in 2018, provides councils with substantially increased flexibilities to build the homes England needs.

The changes being introduced are due to take effect from 1 April 2021, with the exception of a new acquisition cap which will be introduced on a phased basis from 1 April 2022.

The new measures include:

- Extending the time councils have to spend Right to Buy receipts from 3 years to 5 years
- An increased cap on the percentage cost of new homes councils can fund from Right to Buy receipts; raised from 30% to 40% per home, making it easier to build replacement homes.
- Allowing receipts to be used for shared ownership, first homes, as well as affordable and social housing, to help councils build the homes their communities need.
- Introducing a cap on the use of Right to Buy receipts for acquisitions to help drive new supply.

Consultation on Right to Buy receipts.

It is reported that on 14 August 2018, alongside the Green Paper "A New Deal for Social Housing", the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government published a consultation on how local authorities could use the receipts they obtained from sales of council housing under the Right to Buy to deliver replacement homes, and how those replacements were measured.

The consultation received a total of 198 responses, which the Government report that they have analysed the responses and these have informed the package of reforms. The published response can be accessed [here](#).

So what is APSE's view on these changes

In the APSE and TCPA report "At a crossroads: Building foundations for healthy communities" there is a call to Government to provide extensive grant funding to LPAs for the direct delivery of social housing and end Right to Buy; social housing has multiple public health benefits and now more than ever represents good value for money to the taxpayer.

The reforms outlined by the Housing Secretary give local authorities more flexibility to determine the tenure of housing that can be built. It also provides a little bit more flexibility in terms of the time cap and the increased percentage of the Right to Buy receipt which can be used to fund new homes.

APSE welcomes the acknowledgment from Government of the key role that local authorities play in providing housing for their communities. However, APSE believes that the reforms represent a missed opportunity to take a holistic approach to housing policy and the role it plays in building strong communities and is, in essence, tinkering around the edges.

The extension in the time permitted for councils to spend the receipts is welcomed. The current limit is unachievable due to complex developments taking more than three years to progress through the planning process. That said, the extension does not provide councils with any certainty over the financing. The business cases associated with council housing developments are based on the longer term and, in many cases, over 25-30 years.

The increase in the cap from 30% to 40% is a step in the right direction. Yet the increase does not go far enough when taking into consideration the challenges facing the housing sector. To ensure that the homes built today are suitable for the future they need to be designed and built to meet councils and the Government's carbon neutrality targets and be resilient to the impacts of climate change. Furthermore, with an ageing population homes also need to be adaptable to allow for people to remain in their homes into their old age.

The increase in the cap from 30% to 40% is a step in the right direction. Yet the increase does not go far enough when taking into consideration the challenges facing the housing sector.

Sustainable homes have a greater upfront build cost and, under the revised cap, local authorities are still required to fund the majority (60%) of the build cost. It is clear from the past decades that building houses that meet the minimum standards does not represent value for money in the long term. Extensive retrofit programmes are now required to ensure that housing of all tenures is safe, energy-efficient and meets the needs of an ageing population, much of which is being funded from the public purse.

On a final point, local authorities currently use Right to Buy receipts to purchase existing properties to supplement their housing stock. APSE acknowledges that in doing so the 'total' housing numbers do not increase. However, councils have adopted this approach to meet the needs of their communities, for example in areas that have a high need for social housing but are restricted in the availability of land upon which to build new homes on. Imposing a cap on acquisitions could have a detrimental impact on the council's ability to provide social housing and undermine wider economic and regeneration programmes

- For more information about these reforms, please contact APSE Principal Advisor Vickie Hacking on vhacking@apse.org.uk.

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A closer look at The Parks Management Forum

Set up during the early stages of the pandemic, The Parks Management Forum was conceived by Paul Rabbitts, Chair of the Forum and Head of Parks, Heritage and Culture at Watford Borough Council, alongside other parks professionals, who wanted to see a new way of ensuring the views of parks professionals were effectively represented. Here we take a look at its progress so far and explore the aims and achievements of this new organisation.

In early 2020, a group of parks managers decided to get together and do something about the lack of professional representation for those that manage parks and green spaces. Since the demise of ILAM, GreenSpace and CabeSpace, there has been a significant gap in an organisation that purely represented parks management professionals. With the advent of the 21st century parks manager and our need to diversify to meet current needs and broaden our skillset, it was an easy decision to come together as a group and take our fortunes into our own hands.

Paul Rabbitts, Head of Parks, Heritage and Culture from Watford Borough Council pulled together an initial meeting of like-minded individuals from across the UK, including representatives from Rugby, Manchester, Nottingham, Walsall, Birmingham, Newcastle upon Tyne, Sheffield, London Boroughs, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Adur and Worthing and the West Midlands to look at what could be done. With a survey carried out of the sector with over 600+ responses, assessing the need for an 'institute' or 'body', the response was a massive "yes". Enter the Parks Management Forum, now under the chair of Paul, we have the beginnings of a movement and organisation that truly represents those working in parks.

We have launched the Parks Management Forum during the COVID lockdown. It seemed like a good time. The crisis has turned the spotlight on the public parks we work in. The Government decreed that they must stay open; at a stroke endorsing our belief that they are an essential service. People have flocked to them in record numbers and staff have worked tirelessly through the crisis to keep parks clean and safe and beautiful.

The Forum has been set up not just to advocate for the need for good-quality public parks, that case has been made incessantly over the last twenty-five years, it has been set up to give a voice to parks professionals, who know more about these places than anyone. We work in them daily; we know our trees and our flowers, our water management and our ice-cream sales, but we also know our users; we know how vital parks are across our communities, and especially in poorer communities. These are not pay-per-entry leisure facilities or stately homes; free access to good quality parks and open spaces is as fundamental to physical and mental health as free access to health care.

This Forum represents an unrivalled reservoir of understanding, expertise and dedication. Running parks is an expert job and we are determined to make our voice heard by politicians as they formulate policies and make financial decisions which have huge repercussions for the viability of public open space. For too long parks, as a discretionary service, have been a poor relation of other public services, down the pecking order as just a 'nice-to-have'. The pandemic has shown that is not where they belong.



THE PARKS MANAGEMENT FORUM
REPRESENTING PARKS PROFESSIONALS

Progress over the last 12 months has been significant. We now have 2,400 followers on LinkedIn, a database of over 1,400 parkies, and over 700 followers on Twitter. We have signed up over 200 founder members, a bank account with a significant sum raised to help us move to the next stage. Our website is up and running, but was developed by a 'volunteer' from the group. With support from APSE, we now have a significant voice in the world of managing parks across the UK. We have met with Green Flag, Fields in Trust, the Chartered Institute of Horticulture, the National Trust, BALI, The Grounds Management Association, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and many others, and have signed up many parks professionals from across the UK, including The Royal Parks. We have developed a constitution, a terms of reference and are developing our business plan to ensure the long term sustainability of the group.

With support from APSE, we now have a significant voice in the world of managing parks across the UK.

Our most significant achievements though included a meeting with Lillian Greenwood MP, Chair of the APPG for Parks and Green Spaces, whereby it was agreed questions would be raised in central government concerning the plight of urban parks. Following on from this, we have now established 'The Parks Collective' who have met on three occasions.

What is the Parks Collective? This is a group that has been pulled together of organisations who all have an interest in public parks and green spaces. This now includes The Landscape Institute, Historic

England, Fields in Trust, the National Trust, Green Flag Award, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Greenspace Scotland, Greenspace Wales, Keep Scotland Beautiful, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, Chief Leisure Officers Association, the Chartered Institute of Horticulture, Play England, The Ramblers Association, Grounds Management Association, The Parks Agency, The Gardens Trust, National Federation of Parks and Green spaces, the Royal Parks, Manchester University, University of the West of England and of course APSE. Our role? To work collaboratively and constructively, to ensure better parks for our communities. All parties agree this is important and we are moving this forward at pace and how we launch a national campaign for better parks and green spaces and secure the capital and revenue funding we desperately need. We are much better together than apart.

The next steps for the Parks Management Forum? We have commissioned a website designer to give us that online presence that is so essential, keeping us all up to date. This will go live in June 2021 with a rebranding as we rename ourselves The Parks Management Association, reflecting more clearly what we are about.

We would encourage you to sign up either as a founder member for as little as £35 or simply email us and we will add you to our mailing list. The current website is www.parksmanagementforum.co.uk and you can email chair@parksmanagementforum.co.uk.

We will let everyone know when this changes, but please do join, we are open to anyone who works in parks and green spaces – in grounds maintenance, management, development, inspections, horticulture. It matters not. #parksmatter

- *Paul spoke on this topic at the APSE Parks and Greenspaces Seminar 2021 on 10 March. You can download the presentations from the event for free from the APSE website.*



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Maintaining local roads to target conditions is still out of reach for local authorities

Each year the Asphalt Industry Alliance (AIA) commissions an independent survey of local authority highways departments in England (including London) and Wales. Rick Green, Chairman of the Asphalt Industry Alliance, provides a summary of this year's findings.

The Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance (ALARM) survey – now in its 26th year – provides detailed insight into the funding and conditions of the local road network, based on information provided directly by those responsible for its maintenance. Its findings are used by stakeholders across the sector for tracking, benchmarking and planning purposes.

ALARM 2021 reports that, despite a 15% increase in highway maintenance budgets, maintaining local roads to target conditions is still out of reach for local authorities. While the extra funding was welcomed, budgets reported are still lower than they were two years ago, and road conditions have yet to see any significant improvement: the average frequency of road surfacing is now once every 68 years and the bill to fix the backlog of maintenance work on local roads in England and Wales is £10.24 billion.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to maintain the highway and are encouraged to do so using asset management principles. However, the up-down approach to funding that ALARM has reported for many years, does not support this. It results in wasteful patch and mend activity – as borne out by the large increase in the number of potholes filled over the past 12 months in England and Wales. Potholes and pothole repairs are the symptoms of an underfunded network, where hard-pressed highway teams continue to have to make tough decisions to keep all of their networks functioning.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising local authorities report that the increase in carriageway maintenance budgets has not yet translated into significant improvements in road conditions and reaching targets remains well out of reach. ALARM shows that if local authorities had sufficient funds to meet their target conditions there would be an additional 14,400 miles of roads in a good state of repair and another 2,000 fewer miles in urgent need of repair.

ALARM shows that if local authorities had sufficient funds to meet their target conditions there would be an additional 14,400 miles of roads in a good state of repair and another 2,000 fewer miles in urgent need of repair.

As the nation looks towards the future and reducing carbon emissions, sustainability will become increasingly important. Eight out of ten local authorities have declared a climate change emergency, but ALARM findings indicate that less than a quarter (23%) have targets to reduce the carbon footprint of the road materials they use. This indicates a possible disconnect between policy and practice and that more needs to be done to encourage uptake of the more sustainable material options available.

With the average frequency of road surfacing now once every 68 years and the bill to fix the backlog still in excess of £10 billion, it's clear that a longer-term approach to local road funding is needed. As part of the post-pandemic reset, we will rely on our local road network to support recovery and underpin levelling up goals. A five-year Government funding package, similar to the commitment made to the strategic network in the two Roads Investment Strategy (RIS) periods, would allow local authority highway asset managers to plan ahead, invest in and implement a more sustainable, cost effective whole life approach to maintaining our local roads.

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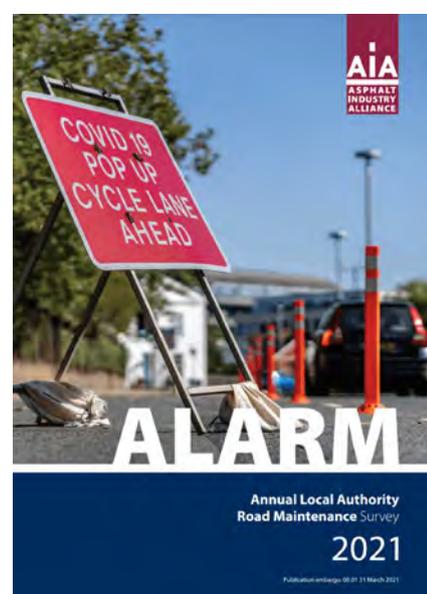
You can download the survey here

ALARM 2021 is the 26th annual survey and 63% of authorities responsible for local roads in England and Wales responded. This demonstrates that, even during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, local authority highway engineers consider it to be a key vehicle for reporting ongoing road conditions.

This report summarises the key findings.

The survey and data collation was carried out between December 2020 and February 2021. Unless otherwise stated, the findings are based on the financial year 2020/21, ending 31 March 2021. Where these are unavailable, figures for the calendar year 2020 were requested.

APSE Performance Networks provides roads, highways and street lighting data in the UK's largest data benchmarking service for local government. If you are not yet involved in data benchmarking for your highways service contact Rob Bailey on rbailey@apse.org.uk.



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Food and climate: Why local government matters

As the preparations get under way for COP26, Pete Ritchie, Executive Director at Nourish Scotland, sheds light on the tools that can be harnessed at a local level to create a more equitable food systems.

As the preparations get under way for the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow, local authorities across the UK are planning their contribution.

Of course the formal negotiations will be between national and supranational governments. Will the US, China and the EU align on cross-border carbon taxes? Will enough money move from the countries responsible for global warming to those most at risk from its impacts? Will guidelines on managing climate risk in the financial sector start evolving into regulation?

But while global action is essential, the changes we need to make to halt global warming will be lived locally. How we rethink mobility, so that we don't simply swap diesel cars for electric ones; how we rethink waste so that reduce, reuse and repair are the norm while collect and dispose are the exception; how we build much needed housing with net zero land take – all these changes affect people's day to day lives.

Trust is a key ingredient in making these changes work. People have to trust government, believe that there's a credible plan, and feel their concerns are heard. This is where local government matters. Surveys show consistently, not just in the UK but globally, higher trust in local than in national government.

Nowhere is trust more needed than on food, and given that the food system accounts for around a third of global greenhouse gas emissions, nowhere is trust more important. The world cannot tackle the climate and nature emergencies without fixing the food system.

Food is personal, cultural and contested. It is abundant yet for many out of reach.

During the pandemic, local authorities moved into the business of food distribution in a way not seen since wartime rationing. And yet we saw inequality in sharp focus, with demand for food banks increasing while the legacy of dietary inequality left people more vulnerable to COVID.

Something else happened, too. The just-in-time supply chain frayed. And though it didn't break, cities and towns in the UK and across the world looked out at the fields surrounding them and wondered why they couldn't buy local food. How could it be that almost everywhere it was easier and cheaper to buy food from 'over there' rather than 'here'? Of course, local farmers responded where they could – and many convenience stores set up new local supply chains almost overnight.

This is why Nourish Scotland and its many partners developed the Glasgow Declaration on food and climate. The local and regional governments signing the declaration are making a commitment to integrated food policies to tackle climate change. In terms of reducing emissions, that means reducing food waste - one caddy, one school and one hospital at a time. It means less meat and dairy, more vegetables and fruit. It means public procurement leading the way. It means more urban food production, and returning nutrients and organic matter to urban and peri-urban land.

But an integrated food policy goes much wider than this. It's about equity – reducing the huge differences in choice and quality we take for granted in the UK. There's no point telling people to eat more veg and fruit when they are unaffordable for the households which would benefit the most. It's about health – how children can have the best possible nutrition in the first 1000 days, how people with long-term health conditions can stay well, and about reshaping the food environment so it's easier to eat what we need.

It's about building community through food and gardens. It's about how we teach our children about food systems. It's about creating fair work and good livelihoods across the food system. It's about having a positive impact on the wider environment, whether that's fair trade, or sustainable fish, or converting to organic food in the public kitchen.

Through integrated food policies, local councils can work with their residents to paint a picture of a food system which is not just greener, but also fairer, healthier and smarter. They don't have all the powers they need to deliver this – though some have more than they use: which is why the Glasgow Declaration also calls on national governments to align with and support their local governments.

Through integrated food policies, local councils can work with their residents to paint a picture of a food system which is not just greener, but also fairer, healthier and smarter.

Local and regional authorities across the UK and globally have been ahead of national governments in developing progressive food policies. Whether it's Ghent's Veggie Thursdays, or Vienna's urban

horticulture, Oaxaca's policy on junk food, Andhra Pradesh's conversion of the whole state to organic farming, Parma's leadership on food waste, London's junk food advertising ban, San Francisco's push on composting or the small city of Mouans-Sartoux converting its canteens to 100% organic – it has been local authorities which have innovated and taken their citizens with them.

The UK has a network of Sustainable Food Places and Glasgow is polishing its new City Food Plan ahead of the COP. As November approaches, we are encouraging local authorities in the UK and globally to sign the Glasgow Declaration and to take part in a high level food systems event during the conference. We are also keen to support local 'food and climate' events – we won't all be able to get to Glasgow, and these events round the world can link up to send a clear message to Glasgow.

Last, but not least: the transition to a more sustainable food system affects farmers most of all. So Nourish Scotland and partners are hosting conversations between farmers and local governments ahead of and at COP26 to look at how these two groups at opposite ends of the food chain can work together for a better system.

In a sense, none of this is new. Local Agenda 21 goes all the way back to Rio in 1992. And local government still matters.

- *Pete gave a presentation on this topic at the APSE Scotland Soft Facilities Management Seminar 2021. To watch the highlights of the event and download Pete's presentation click here.*



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Litter Picking Drop-Ins: A New Approach to Litter Picking During Lockdown



We are all adjusting to the new normal, but what does that mean for litter picking? Gone are the days when we could arrange a community litter-picking event and invite as many people as possible to get involved. Now we must consider new legislation, distancing measures, and increased risks.

A new approach was needed and the idea of the litter picking drop-in's stations was born. This concept has been installed by several local authorities across the UK and here at Helping Hand Environmental, we would like to share with you Manchester City Council's Litter Picking Drop-Ins case study – in support of the Keep Manchester Tidy initiative and Keep Britain Tidy's Love Parks campaign.

How does it work?

Initially the Council selected a small number of parks to work in across the city. At each park set up a litter picking station. The local authority invited people to come along through social media and linked the activity to a wider campaign; Love Parks.

Setting out the station

The litter picking station itself was quite simple and comprised of;

- A table with PPE and hand sanitiser
- Litter pickers arranged individually (so people only touch the one they will use)
- Bag hoops and bags
- A container for people to deposit the equipment they have used
- Sanitising wash and wipes to clean equipment after use
- Promotional banner and flag promoting Keep Manchester Tidy
- One or two friendly station managers to engage potential volunteers (at a distance)
- Tape or small barrier to help maintain distancing at the station
- An up to date risk assessment

Council staff manned the station and invited people to come along between 10 am and 2 pm. They could take equipment and pick litter for as long or as short a time as they wished. They asked that people acted as either solo litter pickers, social bubble litter pickers, or small group litter pickers of no more than six socially distanced people – making arrangements for people to either return collected litter to the station, or to other designated points across the City.

Manchester City Council's next plan is to use this approach to test litter-picking stations in district centres and other urban spaces.

What worked well?

The litter picking stations were a success. This is what people liked about them:

- Flexibility of being able to turn up to suit, as opposed to having to meet somewhere at a fixed starting time
- Flexibility to pick for just a short while. This meant people didn't feel guilty about leaving a group early or not doing enough for the group. People were also surprised about how much litter can be collected in a short space of time
- Full compliance with COVID regulations
- Greater inclusivity with no pressure to be part of a group – including several disabled people getting involved who would not have otherwise have joined an organised litter pick.
- Many of those who took a litter picker had conversions with other members of the public. This proved to be a good way to promote the profile of litter picking as a positive and valuable community activity. Volunteers told us how they were thanked for their litter picking work by passers-by.
- We thought that when the public see volunteers doing litter picking, as opposed to paid council workers, it acts as a nudge for them to do the right thing and not drop litter. Volunteers agreed with this thought.

What Were the Challenges?

Manchester City Council faced very few challenges in using this approach. The weather being too wet or very hot did reduce the numbers of people visiting the station, but not significantly. They did have to remain vigilant about social distancing; when people became passionate about cleaning up they sometimes forgot that they needed to maintain their distance.

Keeping it Working

The local authority have continued to deliver litter picking through drop-in stations. Partnering with their colleagues in Biffa to add information and resources about recycling to our stations and this has proved popular in attracting passers-by to visit the station.

2021 Plans

Manchester City Council's next plan is to use this approach to test litter-picking stations in district centres and other urban spaces and host the drop ins for corporate groups and large organisations to support their Keep Manchester Tidy initiative.

How we lent a Helping Hand to this project?

We have been Manchester City Council key supplier of sustainable litter clearance hand tools in support of their community engagement projects for over the last 10 years including Love Parks, Keep Manchester Tidy and their new Litter picking Drop In Stations.

Our safer litter collection range as helped Emma and her council colleagues to support their volunteers with social distance litter picks safely – including our folding litter pickers, disinfectant sprays and NEW Handicart Duo helps to support safer litter segregation across the City.

- *To watch a trial of the Handicart Duo click here.*



Over and out: How should councils be managing the end of PFI contracts?

Mo Baines, APSE's Head of Communication and Coordination explores the issues surrounding the end of PFI schemes, and what local councils need to look out for when managing the exit from PFI contracts. Not a new issue...

Back in 2004, as a then newbie Principal Advisor in the APSE Team, I wrote a briefing on proposed amendments to the Private Finance initiative. It opened with this statement:

"APSE amongst other organisations has strongly criticised the Government's strategy on PFI. Under current rules the structure of PFI funding favours the use of PFI over and above traditional funding routes. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the availability of PFI credits to support the cost of borrowing and the long-term costs of running facilities to a generous level that is not matched under traditional procurement routes." That same briefing concluded with welcoming some marginal changes but stated that "the use of private money over traditional procurement routes is still contentious because of the increased costs of borrowing on the private markets. The Secretary of State Nick Raynsford, indicated to Parliament on 13 July that there will be further announcements to amend PFI. It is hoped that this will relate to the creation of an even playing field on PFI credits and the credit approvals available to local authorities through traditional procurement routes".

However, very little changed. PFI remained attractive to finance markets and facilities management companies for many years after, but a costly, complex and cumbersome contractual process for local

councils and other public bodies; PFI for many remained the only game in town. Fast forward 17 years (and many grey hairs later!) I have just finalised a further APSE briefing as many public bodies look to the end of PFI schemes. As we will see, many of the issues, so obviously predicted at the time, have now come back to the fore as the public authorities, ultimately responsible for managing the exit arrangements from PFI schemes, grapple to work through the issues. This has been highlighted by two recent reports.

Groundhog day?

In June 2020 the National Audit Office published its report 'Managing PFI assets and services as contracts end'. The report, rather than considering the value for money aspects of PFI contracts, instead concentrated on the background to PFI, the contracts due to expire (with a focus on England although PFI contracts are still in operation in the devolved administrations) and the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders. The NAO report also considered the skills and capabilities of authorities, who are essentially the public bodies responsible for PFI contracts, for the expiry process and how they were preparing for the delivery of contract expiry.

The NAO report was quickly followed in March 2021 by a report of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) 'Managing the Expiry of PFI contracts'. The PAC reports that PFI was used from the early 1990s to build over 700 public infrastructure assets. These typically included schools, hospitals and roads as well as prisons, waste and street lighting schemes. The PFI deals were structured in such a way that the public sector entered into long-term contracts with a private sector company, usually a special purpose vehicle created to finance the project, through both debt and equity investors. The PFI company would then design and build the asset and, most often in schemes known as DBFO Schemes, also finance and operate the asset.

For the lifetime of the contract, following construction, the private company continues to operate and maintain the assets, together with associated services – which can be between 25–30 years. To fund the debt and meet contract obligations – such as facilities maintenance or services like cleaning – the public sector makes annual payments to the PFI company. These payments also cover interest and provide payments to shareholders by way of dividends.

However, with over 700 PFI contracts, the PAC estimates around 200 of these projects will finish in the next ten years. As these contracts expire those assets, and in many cases services, will transfer back to the public sector. Concerns have now been made about the state of the assets that the public sector will inherit back once contracts end; how to enforce the reinstatement of the assets to the agreed conditions and how to manage the assets and services in the future. Some may indeed question if these assets will be fit for purpose.

However, with over 700 PFI contracts, the PAC estimates around 200 of these projects will finish in the next ten years. As these contracts expire those assets, and in many cases services, will transfer back to the public sector.

A particular area of concern is the use of the lifecycle fund. The lifecycle pot is money built up during the contract to pay for planned, periodic maintenance. However, the NAO found many authorities felt this lifecycle pot was insufficient to cover the costs that it was intended to, and that ongoing monitoring of the assets was hindered by poor data and information. In addition, the money left in the lifecycle pot, at the end of a scheme, can be redistributed to shareholders, thereby creating a perverse incentive to underspend on maintenance and reinstatement. When factoring in the complexities of education-based schemes, where schools have converted to academies but the local authority is responsible for managing the PFI exit, there may be a disconnect between the interests of all of the parties involved.

So what do we know now?

A number of emerging issues therefore are worthy of note: -

- The asset conditions survey is seen as critical to the management of the expiry of the PFI contract. In many cases this is not done or not done early enough to enable effective rectification of the issues. It also raises issues about available skills to conduct, report and act on such surveys.
- A lack of performance information about the asset can hinder negotiations around the expiry of the contract.
- The people with the knowledge and expertise at the start of PFI contracts are often not around at their expiry creating a knowledge gap.
- There is a lack of comprehensive information about the contract details and variations, and in some cases no certainty as to expiry dates or what is on the horizon.
- Decisions need to be considered early on in the process as to how the service continuity element will continue at the expiry of the contract – for example bringing services in-house.
- Authorities are attempting to deal with PFI expiry on top of their existing workloads and in many cases poorly resourced legal, property and services teams. This is particularly acute in authorities where there may be only one PFI in place, leading to a skills and resources gap.

What can we do about it?

Lessons can be drawn from the experiences of local authorities in insourcing outsourced service contracts. In some cases, such as leisure contracts, assets were included within the original outsourced contracts, though not transferred to providers, and insourcing those contracts has often involved an asset conditions survey and significant cost in upgrading and rectifying the asset to enable its continued use or disposal as part of a subsequent asset rationalisation approach.

Lessons can be drawn from the experiences of local authorities in insourcing outsourced service contracts.

Lessons on insourcing service contracts can also be drawn from APSE's recent report 'Rebuilding Capacity: The case for insourcing public contracts'. This report highlighted the following steps when considering insourcing and could easily be applied to the process for the expiry of service element contracts in PFI schemes:-

- A calendar of review: Knowing what to expect, when to expect it, as well as ensuring sufficient planning time (suggested as ideally two years).
- Performance Information: Gathering of performance data to ensure there is knowledge of successes and failures.
- Consultation: Consultation with key stakeholders so that new service arrangements better reflect current and emerging needs (than those anticipated at the original outsourcing).
- Public policy integration: This approach takes into account newer public policy needs. Whether that is greener environmental considerations or matters such as social value in how the contract will be delivered.
- Capacity, workforce and skills: To look at how barriers to insourcing can be overcome, where a service may sit within a newly insourced provision, how to rebuild and use capacity - such as from a TUPE workforce arrangement or existing council teams - and develop a skills strategy.
- Multi-disciplinary project teams: Bringing together effective teams to manage the process, including finance, legal, HR and operational specialists.

The above is by no means an exhaustive checklist but it is included to highlight the fact that, whilst the expiry of PFI contracts is daunting, local authorities have effectively managed insourcing previously outsourced contracts in recent years. They have done so whilst developing more effective service delivery methods and approaches which have enhanced public policy outcomes for local areas.

So yes the problems are immense, and resources will be needed. The problems were also highly predictable. But it would be churlish to say 'we told you so'. So instead we are doing what APSE does best and providing a network for members to share their views, plans and experiences so far.

- *All APSE members are invited to a FREE online event on the issues raised within this article which will include finance, legal and HR experts sharing their views and ideas on this issue. Visit the APSE website to book your place.*

“The green energy capital of Scotland”

Knockroon Estate, on the outskirts of Cumnock, has been unveiled as the location for a ground breaking, world-leading energy project which will revolutionise how renewable energy supplies are generated, stored and used by communities in the area.

Knockroon Estate, on the outskirts of Cumnock, has been unveiled as the location for a ground breaking, world-leading energy project which will revolutionise how renewable energy supplies are generated, stored and used by communities in the area.

The National Energy Research Demonstrator Project (NERD) will focus on Cumnock as a Regional Community Living Lab for Just Transition to Renewable Power, Heat and Transport, and a centre of academic research and innovation thanks to an investment of £17 million from the UK Government backed up with £7.5 million from East Ayrshire Council – as part of the £251.5 million Ayrshire Growth Deal.

The NERD project will develop a centre of excellence for clean energy research, harnessing existing and new renewable energy technologies (such as hydrogen and geothermal heat) to provide solutions to produce and store energy and create a new, more flexible energy grid.

Cumnock and the surrounding area provides a unique location to investigate a wide mix of energy technologies. This is due to its unique geography, the extent and scale of renewable energy developments in the vicinity (in particular windfarms) and the past history of mineral extraction activity in the area. The area represents the challenges that need to be overcome nationally and internationally if net zero targets and low cost energy generation are to be realised. Where solutions can be developed for the Cumnock area, through the NERD project, they can be widely replicable in other Scottish, UK and European towns.

A number of sites around Cumnock were considered as potential locations for the NERD Centre of Excellence, including Caponacre Industrial Estate; land to the east of Auchinleck Road in Cumnock; the former Auchinleck Academy site and land on the Knockroon Estate. Following assessment and evaluation of all the land options in relation to the objectives of the NERD, and in consultation with the key partners involved in the project, Knockroon Estate emerged as the preferred location.

This site offers a prominent location within Cumnock that will realise the ambitions and activities of the NERD Centre of Excellence that have been proposed within the Outline Business Case. It has also been confirmed that the Council will activate a clause which was part of a Minute of Agreement agreed between East Ayrshire Council and the Developer in November 2010, relating the Knockroon Masterplan – subject to both parties reaching agreement on the final design of the building relative to the Knockroon Design Guidance.

The location of the site will offer the potential opportunity to create an affordable low carbon heat network with the Barony Campus, existing housing infrastructure and the new housing being delivered as part of the Knockroon Masterplan.

A

key project objective is for the NERD project to maximise links with East Ayrshire schools and further education establishments across Scotland as well as maximise job creation and work experience opportunities. The aim is to enhance the offering of existing STEM related education within schools and in so doing help improve options for employment opportunities and, in the longer term, tackle deprivation across communities within the Cumnock area and East Ayrshire as a whole. The Knockroon Estate site offers the best opportunity to maximise educational and physical links to the new Barony Campus, with the Centre of Excellence offering practical STEM courses for all ages.

In addition, the location of the site will offer the potential opportunity to create an affordable low carbon heat network with the Barony Campus, existing housing infrastructure and the new housing being delivered as part of the Knockroon Masterplan.

Whilst the preferred location for the NERD Centre of Excellence is the Knockroon Estate in Cumnock, there will be significant NERD activity within Auchinleck and other surrounding communities over the lifetime of the project. The programme of demonstrator projects aims to introduce low carbon solutions with much of the activity taking place in these communities, including developing low carbon hubs at key locations. The NERD project team will continue to work closely with all communities in the south of East Ayrshire to better understand their low carbon aspirations and how the NERD project could help develop and facilitate community energy projects.

Karl Doroszenko, Development Planning and Regeneration Manager with East Ayrshire Council is heading up the project team for the NERD project.

He said, “This is exciting news for the communities of Auchinleck and Cumnock. The NERD project will bring many benefits and advantages to these local communities over the lifetime of the project – and beyond – as the low carbon alternatives start to revolutionise modern day living.

“Agreeing the location for the Centre of Excellence is the first major milestone for this project and we look forward to working with Faithful and Gould, the appointed design team, to finalise the designs for the NERD Centre of Excellence at Knockroon Estate.”

While subject to planning permission it is anticipated, that the construction for the Centre of Excellence building and the two Demonstrator Houses will begin in 2022, with completion in autumn 2023.

More information on East Ayrshire website and <https://www.ayrshiregrowthdeal.co.uk/>





State of UK Parks Survey 2021

It has been 20 years now since the first public parks assessment and almost 7 since the first State of UK Parks report. We have just come through a tough year for local authority parks services and it is time to take stock and plan for the future.

APSE and CFP are keen to build on both the previous State of UK parks research and also APSE's own state of the market research to create a comprehensive picture of the current state of our parks and greenspaces. To that end we have designed a new research project and we hope that you will be able to take part.

The closing date is 30 April 2021.

We are aiming to publish the results in late May.

The link to the survey is [here](#) and a reference version of the survey can be used to gather the necessary information before completing the survey online.



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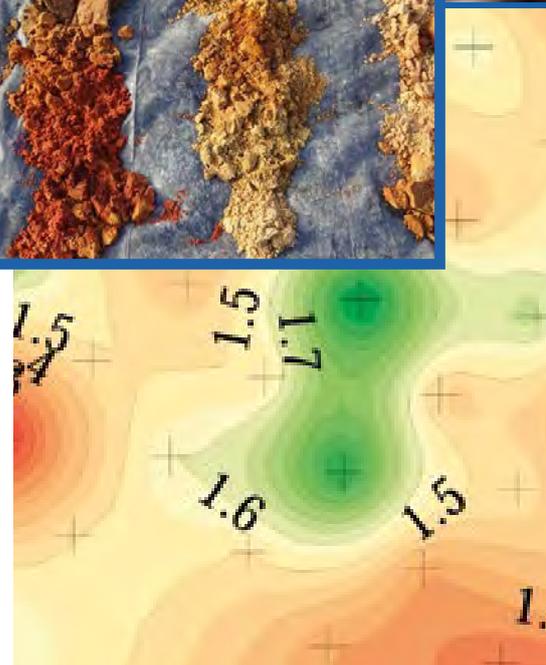
CDS are with you every step of the way, from Feasibility Studies, Landscape and Concept Design through to Planning, Construction and Delivery, ensuring a seamless experience from inception to completion.



Our team of highly qualified specialists - field surveyors, engineers and designers - are committed to creating beautifully landscaped and thoughtfully constructed developments. Ones that have distinctive spatial qualities but also offer excellent commercial value, and that are low-maintenance environments with minimal operational costs.

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New APSE Energy Approved Partners:
Welcome **ABB**



ABB is a global leader in electrical products and solutions, operating in more than 100 countries, with over 200 manufacturing sites. As our Electric Vehicle Charge Point Supply Partner, APSE Energy members will benefit enormously from ABB's 130-year history of excellence and globe-spanning expertise.

Speaking of this exciting new partnership, Joe Ellwood, EV Charging Specialist at ABB said, "ABB pushes the boundaries of electric vehicle technology to drive performance to new levels. At the forefront of smarter, reliable, and emission-free mobility, we also have years of experience in creating, installing and maintaining charging infrastructure, including several nationwide charger networks.

"APSE is highly regarded as a trusted brand and authoritative voice in the local government energy sector. We cannot wait to engage with member authorities to help deliver cleaner, greener and smarter neighbourhoods for local communities."

As our Electric Vehicle Charge Point Supply Partner, APSE Energy members will benefit enormously from ABB's 130-year history of excellence and globe-spanning expertise.

Alongside a simple-to-use service, ABB offers a total EV charging solution - from compact, high quality AC wallboxes and reliable DC fast charging stations with robust connectivity, to innovative on-demand electric bus charging systems.

Phil Brennan, Head of APSE Energy, added, "As a market-leader in EV charging, ABB is a most welcome addition to the APSE family. Their customer-first approach helps them to stand out from the crowd and there is no doubt that they will provide a real budget boost for our members, particularly at a time of financial uncertainty."

For more information about ABB and how they can help your local authority [click here](#)



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Paving the way in best practice

The Deal is very much real for Wigan's highways. Having scooped the Best Service Team in Highways Maintenance at the APSE Service Awards in 2020, we take a closer look at the secrets to the Council's success

Wigan Council is the 9th largest metropolitan authority and maintains 1,160km highways, 36,500 street-lights and over 400 structures, worth £1.62bn. Management of the highway infrastructure and services are carried out in-house by the Highways and Network Management Group. Over the last 4 years this group has been successful in bidding for £6.5m DfT Challenge and Flood Recovery funding and developed Invest to Save business cases that have secured £19.9m from council funding.

To achieve these successes, we have transformed the way we work – not only the systems and processes – but our staff and contractor behaviours, values and ethos. The Council recognises that its staff and contractors are its most valuable asset; and this approach has empowered the workforce to be innovative and creative to bring forward new ideas to improve our services.

Wigan Council operates as a part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and collaborates on the delivery of its highway services through shared services. There are now GM frameworks in place for the key services of highways, bridges and winter maintenance. Moreover, where practicable, service standards have been aligned across boundaries to ensure consistency for highway users, most notably around highway safety inspections and resulting minor repairs.

Regional and national leader in carriageways

The condition of the borough's carriageways is regularly monitored and annual reporting to DfT shows that the percentage of carriageways in need of maintenance soon is being maintained in 'steady-state'. Their condition is also measured as being some of the best, both regionally and nationally, over the last 5 years.

Over the same period and using the principles of both asset management and 'prevention is better than cure', the overall number of highway defects has been reduced by 29%.

APSE benchmarking data shows that the rate of carriageway defects for Wigan is 0.23 per km, which is well below the family average 0.42 per km and lower than the figure for 'All Authorities', with an average 0.33 per km.

Safety first

Moreover, 99.76% of Wigan's highway safety inspections have been completed within their target time, which compares very well with the family and All Authorities averages of 91.47% and 92.45% respectively.

All highway safety inspections and minor repairs are recorded digitally via hand-held IT using the YOTTA Mayrise system. APSE benchmarking, shows the council's performance in repairing highway defects is also top performing.

APSE benchmarking data shows that the rate of carriageway defects for Wigan is 0.23 per km, which is well below the family average 0.42 per km and lower than the figure for All Authorities, with an average 0.33 per km.



However, we have identified key areas for improvement. This has included 'merging' the Network Management and Infrastructure Maintenance Group's services to make them more efficient, with a 'single point' of contact, accountability and improved service reporting to Members and residents.

Some 'quick-wins'

Using our Accountable Team approach, several 'quick-win' operational service changes have been implemented, delivering immediate benefits:

Use of a 'one man in a van' approach for emergency and high priority defects was introduced as a trial in January 2020 and improved performance levels to 99% completion for these category works.

Weekly quality and performance meetings jointly held with the inspectors and operatives have significantly reduced the number of sub-standard repairs that were being experienced.

Our Highway Services have been APSE Performance Networks Finalist every year since 2016.

Our Highway Services have been APSE Performance Networks Finalist every year since 2016.

Success with structures

The council maintains 112 road bridges with a bridge condition BCI_{AV} = 89.54, with no current weight restrictions in place. This compares favourably with family/All averages of 84.17/85.01%.

A significant part of achieving this outcome is by completing 100% of the General and Principal inspections within their target time, which compares favourably with the family average 87.23/87.92% and much higher than the figure for 'all' authorities, with an average 85.27/83.16%. All inspections are recorded digitally via handheld IT and PONTIS database.

This year our structures team have played a key role in the creation of a new £20m, 2.1km link road which will form part of the GM Key Route Network. The creation of new structures and repurposing of existing structures has offered unique and contrasting challenges, as detailed below.

Poolstock Culvert is an existing Victorian era structure being repurposed to act as a culvert under for the new road. It is a four-ring brick arch of approximately 29.5m length. To ensure the structure could provide serviceability for the new road, various defects needed to be addressed, particularly 4 longitudinal cracks.

Ground scan, ultrasonic radar and an endoscope were used to detect the full extent of the cracks. Remediation works using 'stitching' of the cracks was carried out using stainless steel rods inserted at 30-45

degrees on either side of the cracks as per the guidance from CIRIA C656.

By contrast, 'Poolstock Bridge' is a brand new integral concrete bridge. To minimise road closures for its construction, it was decided to use W12 precast prestressed beams with each beam having a span of 31m and weighing 68 tonnes each. This work was completed over only 3 weekends.

Our Highway Structures service has been shortlisted as finalist in the APSE 2020 Innovation Awards.

Highway Drainage

Over recent years, our borough experienced a number of flooding events that significantly challenged the resilience of our highway infrastructure. Following HMEP guidance on the management of drainage assets, the Council has undertaken a full review of its highway drainage assets including:

- Working with YOTTA, In-Touch and KaarbonTech to create a comprehensive asset records;
- Undertaken annual surveys to develop our risk-based approach for planned and reactive maintenance;
- Partnered with Sapphire Utilities to undertake condition surveys of drains located on the KRN, Resilient Network and known Flood Risk areas;
- Evaluated the use of sensor technology and how this could be used to improve responding to severe weather events.

This approach supported our successful DfT Challenge Fund 2b bid for Highway Drainage Infrastructure Rehabilitation Programme, for which we were awarded £884k and will be implemented over 2020-21 years.

What next for Wigan's Highways team?

Wigan Council has successfully transformed its highway services, rather than cut them, to support the council in delivering its £160m budget savings.

As a result, our highway services have been recognised regionally and nationally, over several years, as being high performing, offering vfm and delivering efficiency through innovation. Moreover, customer feedback shows our services are highly valued by our councillors' and communities; and the council has demonstrated this through continued support for capital Invest to Save opportunities and retaining its services in-house.

- *APSE performance networks is the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking service across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Used by over 200 local authorities it leads the way in local government benchmarking. For more information about how Performance Networks membership can help improve the performance of your frontline service click here.*

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Planning for power

APSE Energy's new report seeks to highlight the role of statutory planning in the enabling, promotion and management of renewable and low carbon energy projects at a local, regional and national scale.



While we recognise that energy projects will require significant investment, and some long-term thinking, local plans are an ideal way to secure a strategic and managed approach. This provides much needed certainty for developers and of course for communities.

It is estimated that more than 1400 municipal bodies, spanning no fewer than 28 countries, have now declared some form of climate and ecological emergency – with more than 300 in the UK alone. Declarations of this nature at a more local level are fundamental, signalling that action on climate change is not the preserve of national governments. The promotion and management of reducing carbon at a local level is critical in joining up the climate change dots; without local action there is little upon which we can build the cumulative impact that we need globally to avert climate disaster.

We know that within the UK the built environment contributes to around 40% of our carbon footprint, with half of that from the energy used within buildings. So, unlocking the potential for renewable energy in buildings and homes has to be at the centre of local action. However, that is easier said than done. With most housing and other assets sitting with private developers, and a complex planning framework, the UK still sees far too many developments that fail to meet the environmental standards that would help reduce rather than exacerbate carbon levels. And this is where planning comes in. While we recognise the pressures on planning, with many councils facing specific challenges both in resource terms, and the legislative frameworks in which they must operate, planning is nonetheless vital.

Harnessing the power of local plans

Local plans, in particular, have a lifespan that allow for the development of energy projects over the long term, but the sooner these come to fruition the greater the carbon reduction in the longer term. Some are already leading the way. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority was an early starter with their Energy Spatial Plan gathering data as far back as 2016, demonstrating that the lead time to adoption can be lengthy. While local planning authorities have faced some confusion – such as in 2015 when then minister Eric Pickles sought to alter the ability of local planning authorities to stipulate the energy performance of residential buildings – we argue that the 2008 Planning Act still remains in place. This requires local plans, taken as a whole, to contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation, including the baseline monitoring of carbon emissions on an annual basis. What is more, the ability of local authorities to set higher standards of energy efficiency in new buildings, and require the generation of renewable energy onsite, was never taken away through legislation, although many have chosen not to include this in local plans.

While we recognise that energy projects will require significant investment, and some long-term thinking, local plans are an ideal way to secure a strategic and managed approach. This provides much needed certainty for developers and of course for communities. Coupled with a rigorous process and tested in terms of viability, local plans can provide the mechanism to ensure that developers improve standards, connect to key infrastructure such as heat networks, and where this is not possible, make financial contributions to energy projects within the local area.

While all local planning authorities must prepare a local plan, the extent of ambitions for environmental objectives to be enshrined within them is varied, and arguably some timidity remains in just how far planning can be used to gain traction on carbon reduction. That is why APSE Energy, with specialist planning associate Tim Crawshaw, set about researching the practical ways in which the power of planning can be harnessed to embed climate change ambitions, looking at councils who have successfully removed blockages within the planning framework, to generate meaningful reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in new developments and embedding renewable energy strategies into planning.

Arguably the development of the 'Merton Rule' has provided a solid legacy for local plans to set targets for renewable energy in new buildings. Initially adopted as part of the Unitary Development Plan of Merton LBC in 2003, this was the first planning policy to mandate the use of micro-renewable energy associated with new buildings.

Stipulating that all major new housing and commercial developments must have provision to generate at least 10% of their projected CO² emissions from onsite renewable sources, this policy was replicated by many local authorities, some increasing this to 20%.

While some probably unfair criticism of the Merton Rule focused on the lack of provision for enhanced energy efficiency measures, and the perceived 'bolt-on' nature of the policy, it is now common for local plans to have a similar policy to the Merton Rule, also including higher standards for Dwelling Emission Rate (DER) over and above the Building Regulations.

The Merton Rule and Stockton-on-Tees: A solid legacy for renewable energy

A recent example of the successful inclusion of ambitious 'Merton Rule' type policies is the Stockton-on-Tees Local Plan (2019). The Council's experiences will undoubtedly be informative to others having faced opposition from developers and a still often confusing legislative context. The 'Examination in Public' took place in 2018 and a series of questions were raised by the inspector, following representations made regarding consistency with the National Planning Policy Framework, the ministerial statements on technical housing standards in 2015, and the financial viability of increasing energy efficiency standards in new build schemes. However, Stockton-on-Tees made a case for the retention of Policy ENV 1 citing the 2008 Planning and Energy Act (2008) and correctly stating that the Deregulation Act was not under a Commencement Order. As such, the powers of local planning authorities to require improved energy efficiency standards remains in place.

Like many others facing similar challenges, the Council successfully cited the Infrastructure Act (2015) and referenced the energy performance standards of the Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4. This enabled them to argue that a 19% improvement over and above Building Regulations was appropriate. Their policy was also consistent with the Clean Growth Strategy and the Tees Valley Strategic Economic Plan, alongside the council's stated commitments to reducing fuel poverty within their area.

What the Stockton-on-Tees case study demonstrates is that it is possible to improve environmental outcomes but this must be robustly evidenced. Moreover, newer policy developments such as the Clean Growth Strategy (2017) and the Industrial Strategy (2017) can support the setting of higher environmental standards. What is more, such small cost uplifts of higher environmental standards should be viewed in the context of the overall life cycle value that sustainable development delivers, for a multitude of stakeholders. This includes significantly lower operational costs of the development, reduction in energy consumption and emissions, much improved resource use, and significantly improved competitiveness. In other words, not shying away from improved environmental standards will deliver long-term cost benefits and energy savings.

Other examples of carbon reduction through local planning

Stockton-on-Tees is one of many innovative authorities maximising carbon reduction through its planning approach. In Gateshead the District Energy Scheme currently serves a number of heat and power customers including the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and Gateshead College. The location places the District Energy Scheme ideally to serve the 'Exemplar Neighbourhood', with plans for around 1,000 homes. Taking in previously developed land in a sustainable location, and supported by supplementary planning documents since 2013 the Exemplar Neighbourhood is an allocation in the local plan. The supplementary planning documents, adopted in advance of the District Energy Scheme, makes reference to the emerging heat network. This integrated approach has resulted in the first applications for 300 homes alongside heat network investment project funding to extend the network to serve the new development. In addition to the current energy centre, heat from redundant mine workings is also being extracted and distributed.

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In Birmingham the successful implementation of the District Energy Scheme is being further supported by the Development Plan (2017). Their specific policy (TP4) requires smaller new developments to connect to the District Heating Scheme while larger schemes must give first consideration to combined heat and power, potentially extending the network. And in Bristol the city council, through Energy Service Bristol, is an example of mature implementation backed up by the local plan. Underpinned by 'heat priority areas', the Bristol Development Framework Core Strategy has specific policies requiring support for and connections to the district heating network. These policies have provided the certainty required for the expansion of the network. The current review retains policies to require connection to district heating and cooling, alongside setting high standards for design and construction of new buildings.

Planning for our future

So to harness planning as a power tool in the fight for a cleaner and greener environment, we need to ensure that in a plan-led system all local planning authorities have an up to date plan. Indeed Planning for the Future (from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government – 2020) requires this to be the case by December 2023 or face direct intervention from Government. Yet it is estimated that around half of local authorities do not have an up to date local plan – while this situation continues, greener planning will fall behind. We are supporting calls made by the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Town and Country Planning Association in planning for climate change, that local planning authorities should attach great weight to climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Our changing climate is a repercussion of actions taken in the past while the agenda is focused entirely on the future. In the same vein, the local plan with sustainability embedded within it, can influence the future we are building for generations to come.

- *The report 'Planning for our Future: Embedding energy and climate change into local plan policies' was written and researched by APSE Energy Associate Tim Crawshaw. The report is free to download for APSE Energy members and is available to view here.*





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