Fife Council Urban Design Training

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The principles also help refocus panel management on key points. Accessibility is a reminder of the importance of relating feedback to the design officer promptly and consistently in order that comments can be incorporated into the planning process. Accountability calls for more consistent reporting on panel activities to the wider council management and elected members, which will help raise awareness of the panel’s role and impact. Monitoring also allows panel members the opportunity to see the influence of their work and the positive role their feedback can have. This is particularly helpful in maintaining the motivation of these voluntary members.

The new guidance does leave some gaps that may require further thinking by local panels. The Proportionate principle does not address the question of what role a local panel should play in major applications that are already being reviewed by CABE or other sub-regional reviews. It is felt by some that it is a waste of the panel’s expertise to have them double up on schemes already receiving detailed design review and that greater impact could be made by the panel if more modest schemes were focused on.

Also, although this has yet to be a significant problem, it is unclear what should be done if there is conflict from the different levels of review. Although final judgement always rests with the development control case officer, contradictory advice may be seen to undermine the objectivity and value of the review process and may be another reason to avoid duplication.

A more specific challenge that has been faced in recent months is how to maintain regular meetings as the frequency of major applications has slowed down as a result of the recession. However, in Haringey’s approach Haringey has taken to tackle this problem is to involve the panel in more strategic planning issues such as the Corporate Strategy and emerging Sustainable Design & Construction guidance. There has also been discussion of using their expertise in developing briefs and area master plans, which would help ensure design values are incorporated in Council strategies from the start.

While the benefits of a design panel can be considerable, both CABE’s research and Haringey’s experience show that a number of fundamental aspects must be in place for the panel to work effectively. A skilled and diverse panel with a clear mandate and rules of operation are crucial aspects in ensuring quality outcomes from the design review process. Integration with the wider planning process is also essential. Maintaining a strong connection with development control can help ensure the right schemes are referred to the panel, and that their comments result in tangible design improvements and help inform the decision-making process.

The new guidance from CABE, the RTPI, RIBA and the Landscape Institute provide valuable advice on these issues, helping to strengthen the role of the panel. The new guidance is a reminder of the importance of relating feedback to the design officer promptly and consistently in order that comments can be incorporated into the planning process. The new guidance also helps ensure objectivity in the assessment and is successful in helping to avoid personal aesthetic expressions of opinion from dominating the conversation. The panel also uses pre-application stage, helping to ensure that planning applications are generally well prepared. The panel’s comments also revolve around the users of the proposed development and offer particular consideration to the character and significance of the project. The panel will also raise awareness of the impact of design panels on the wider council management and elected members, which will help raise awareness of the panel’s role and impact.

In 2006 Fife Council was awarded a commendation in the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning for its Fife Urban Design Action Plan. The judges were impressed with the 19 service improvements demonstrating strong commitment to raising design quality, highlighting the particular influence of the proposed officer and elected member training. This article charts the development of design panels and development management and reflects on the effects that officer and member training has had on practice. The evaluation is based on written questionnaires distributed at the conclusion of each training session as well as interviews with officers and members between one and three years later.

**CONCLUSION**

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The training is seen as an initial grounding in urban design, from which a continuing programme is being developed by the Council. A new workshop about contemporary design versus a historicist approach aimed at both officers and members is currently being planned. Members are also being briefed about a newly developed FIFE Sustainability Checklist and recent urban design trips (Poundbury, Upton, Freiburg, Greenwich Millennium Village) undertaken as part of the Council’s Designing Sustainable Communities Initiative.

There was a clear expectation that participants would need to be involved in considerable work both during the sessions and in between.

The training helped councillors think about how proposals conform to urban design principles, not just how many people objected. Both believe that the role of the three permanent specialist urban design officers has been important in raising the profile and co-ordinating action. However, they acknowledge that councillors are learning about many things all at once and more needs to be done to engage members. One suggests that the slowdown in the economy is a good time to upgrade skills and improve guidance. The chair and vice-chair of the planning committee are mentioned as the Council’s Design Champions. Both agree that this role has remained underdeveloped, with the chair asserting that promoting good quality urban design is integral to his position in any case.

CONCLUSIONS
The example of Fife Council illustrates an authority which has taken the urban design agenda very seriously. It has created a set of documents providing excellent information for developers which have been recognised nationally, established positions to lead urban design initiatives, promoted a programme of learning for officers and members and is beginning to see evidence that these measures are leading to improvements in the quality of development on the ground. The role of specialist officers in promoting urban design and co-ordinating action across the whole authority has been important, especially where officers are scattered across geographical areas.

Although it is still early in terms of effects on the ground, the examples mentioned above illustrate that there is a growing confidence to ensure that development proposals conform to basic urban design principles, for example, clearly distinguishing public and private space, joining up streets and having building entrances facing into the street.

It becomes clear from the experience of Fife, and this is backed up by the trainers’ experience in five other local authorities in Scotland, that there are several critical recommendations when a local authority undertakes on a training programme, for example, that good examples are produced on the ground. Two years after the first training, participants confirm that the training has resulted in greater confidence to ensure that development proposals conform to urban design principles.

The training directly spawned activity resulting in improved policy and increased guidance. The Council commissioned Gillinies LLP to produce the FIFE Masterplans Handbook to guide major settlement expansion, which won the Commendation for Development Management in the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning 2007. The latest drafts of local plans include diagrammatic strategic development frameworks for major land allocations that are in line with urban design principles discussed as part of the training.

The chair and vice-chair of the planning committee are mentioned as the Council’s Design Champions. Both agree that this role has remained underdeveloped, with the chair asserting that promoting good quality urban design is integral to his position in any case.

However, the ultimate value of the whole exercise is what is happening on the ground and it is that which will eventually define the real success or failure of the training. Urban design is complex and culture change takes a long time. There is evidence that the culture has started to change in Fife but much remains to be done, with officers, members and local communities. For example, transportation officers took part in the urban design training.

There is a growing confidence to ensure that development proposals conform to basic urban design principles and the Council has started to revise policies but their translation into practice will define their worth. There is an urgent need now to put new design policies and guidance into practice so that more good examples are produced on the ground.

The Fife case shows that a firm foundation of training initiatives can instil confidence, facilitate dialogue and promote change. But it is not in itself a guarantee of significant change: this depends on strong and sustained leadership and commitment from both officers and members and the profile and co-ordination of action. However, the ultimate value of the whole exercise lies in what is happening on the ground and it is that which will eventually define the real success or failure of the training. Urban design is complex and culture change takes a long time. There is evidence that the culture has started to change in Fife but much remains to be done, with officers, members and local communities. For example, transportation officers took part in the urban design training.

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