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 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 doubling 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. Overall, Haringey has taken to tackle this problem is to involve the panel in more strategic planning issues such as the Council’s Strategy and emerging Sustainable Design & Construction guidance. There has also been discussion of using their expertise in developing site 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 in order 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 and emerging Sustainable Design & Construction guidance. In my experience show that a number of problems can be avoided duplication and a more effective use of panel time can be made by ensuring that major applications are sent to the panel in a timely fashion.

CONCLUSION

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This article charts the development of Fife Council’s Urban Design Action Plan as well as interviews with officers and members between one and three years later. The Action Plan was developed as a response to the Building for Life criteria as a framework for architecture, engineering, conservation and urban design. In recent years Fife has been one of the more proactive local authorities in Scotland in terms of initiatives to raise design quality. These aspirations were motivated by Scottish Government’s Designing Places policy promoting the design agenda and emerging Sustainable Design & Construction guidance.

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In January 2007 Fife Council launched their Urban Design Action Plan, which sets out the Council’s 19 service improvements demonstrating strong commitment to raising design quality, highlighting in particular the proposed officer and elected member training. The Action Plan was developed as a response to the Building for Life criteria as a framework for architecture, engineering, conservation and urban design.

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While the panel has always maintained a strong connection with development control in order that comments can be incorporated into the decision-making process, 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 doubling 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.

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urban design principles, an exercise applying these principles in decisions about planning applications and a discussion about the role of members in relation to other participants in the planning process. 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 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.

MEMBERS

Members were also positive about the training immediately afterwards. The vice-chair of the planning committee notices that basic urban design messages about a sense of place are beginning to take root, becoming more ingrained in daily discussions. He cites the example of the urban design framework in the new plan for St. Andrews and East FIFE, which aims to promote connectivity, amongst other design principles, and believes that guidance is essential early in the process for large capital projects. The vice-chair of the planning committee states that

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. Officers acknowledge that a change has begun, including amongst some councillors. One policy officer moved from FIFE to Moray Council in Scotland and was instrumental in initiating similar training there.

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 slow-down in the economy is a good time to upgrade skills and improve guidance. The chair and vice-chair of the planning committee are named 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 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.

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 if quality is to be consistently raised in the long term.

• Marilyn Higgins, Senior Lecturer, School of the Built Environment, Heriot-Watt University and Leslie Forsyth, Lecturer, School of the Built Environment, Edinburgh College of Art

• Balcomie Green designed with significant input from officers

• Cuparmuir site entrance, scheme originally rejected

• Balcomie Green, Crail, corner emphasis