Editorial

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In this issue the papers reflect the wide range of activities that come within the compass of planning. Nicola Dempsey's briefing¹ on a UK-India research network addresses the core of spatial planning in terms of the arrangement of new development in relation to existing urban form to change characteristics of city size, shape, density, land use, layout and building type. It touches on the importance of infrastructure networks in planning effective and efficient urban development. This is an issue also discussed in Nicholas Falk's briefing,² which looks to Europe for examples of how to plan for housing needs and urban regeneration. Falk's contribution points out the role of planning in providing housing choice and supporting stable housing markets, while also generating local economic development. The place-making role of planning is covered in the Urbanwords³ project described by Rob Cowan, with its attention to how people invest local places with meaning, while the regulatory dimensions are discussed by Phil Allmendinger in a paper presenting research on the delays to the development process resulting from the exercise of development control in the UK.⁴

The final three papers all consider an issue of growing importance: the resilience of our urban fabric. Lamond and Proverbs⁵ consider the lessons from an international review for flood-proofing homes and explore the reasons why installation of such measures may not occur. The resilience theme is broadened out in Lee Boshier's briefing⁶ on a toolkit for embedding resilience to both natural and manmade threats into infrastructure and built assets, and Hewitt, Potangaroa and Wilkinson⁷ consider the potential within urban governance and planning systems for responding after a disaster has occurred, drawing on research from Banda Aceh after the 2004 tsunami.

There are three themes that I take from this selection of papers. First, planning is inherently complex and multifaceted. It operates with many different types of policy tools: coordination of development and infrastructure, regulation of the details of new development, special toolkits such as Boshier's PRE-EMPT package and the public participation implied by Urbanwords. It also operates at many different scales from the development project through to the local place with meaning for a specific community and then up to the urban area and the infrastructure network. The available tools and the scales of planning activity interact to provide more complexity. This often leads to confusion in the public arena, in the media and amongst the public who can be unsure of what exactly 'planning' is doing; the result tends to be a focus back onto the regulatory aspects

of planning. However, these papers point to the variety of planning work and its associated creativity and flexibility in addressing social problems, a point it would be good to get out into the public domain more consistently.

Second, only one of these papers headlines sustainability but all address aspects of sustainable development. Between them they cover concern with meeting social needs, supporting local economic development, mitigating environmental impacts and building resilience to climate change. Delivering sustainable urban development is the major challenge for planning systems. It is often easier to deliver on one aspect of sustainability rather than address the holistic nature of the concept through an integrated approach. Research and practice on such integration is still lacking and, in the face of this knowledge and practice gap, attention should be paid to the careful consideration of alternatives, trade-offs and choices within planning decision-making. Dealing with sustainable development issue by issue, facet by facet without recognising that choices are being made and implicit priorities established is not sufficient for addressing the sustainability challenge.

Third, learning from international practice is centrally important; even this small collection of papers brings a wealth of experience from different countries together. Without learning from what others are doing, any particular planning system can end up going over established ground and not developing innovative ways of tackling contemporary problems. The trick is to learn from what is happening in other locations and then understand how to adapt these insights to local circumstances and contexts 'back home'. This involves knowing one's own governance context well – its strengths and limitations, its flexibility and its constraints – and also understanding the values, desires and fears of one's own communities.

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