Spatial planning in an era of devolved responsibility: the impact on development management and policy-making

Supervisors: Dr Stephen Essex (Director of Studies) and Professor Christopher Balch

Applications are invited for a three-year PhD studentship. The studentship is expected to commence on the 1st October 2015 or 1st January 2016.

Project description: The restructuring of governance systems in the UK, involving the devolution to constituent countries, city regions and counties as well as the emergence of new ‘greater than local’ structures such as combined local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships, have fundamentally changed the planning landscape of the UK. The planning system itself, following the Localism Act of 2011 and the National Planning Policy Framework of 2012, no longer has a regional tier and responsibility for plan-making has been devolved to the local level both in the form of Local Plans by local planning authorities and Neighbourhood Plans by local communities and residents. It is not just planning professionals, such as planners, surveyors and lawyers, and local communities that have had to respond to this new landscape, but land and development interests and businesses, who appear to have disproportionate power and influence in the process in the current political climate, despite claims of greater participative democracy and localism.

The aim of this research project is to evaluate how the various stakeholders have responded to the new landscape of planning and the effect of the reconfigured systems on power, influence, collaboration and partnerships on decision-making in local areas. The key objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the extent to which the process has engaged with other planning professional groups and a wider range of community members, development and business interests and stakeholders to produce an improved shared meaning and understanding of issues;
2. To evaluate how the issues identified by this process informed, influenced and changed the content and formulation of policy and the outcomes of development applications; and
3. To examine the effect of the planning process on the capacity of local planning authorities, neighbourhoods and other stakeholders as learning organisations to deliver these aspirations.

The research provides an opportunity to explore the challenges for planning policy and practice created by recent Government’s reforms, including dealing with both the community and other scales of spatial planning. The findings of the research will also have lessons of best practice for planning policy and practice for wider dissemination at the national level.

Key aspects of the research training: The research will focus on a number of local planning authority areas who are considered to be ‘early adopters’ in this process and which represent a range of governance structures (unitary, combined, urban/rural). The research will include the evaluation of documentation about the nature and scope of the ‘project plan’ preparation; development management outcomes using planning registers and committee minutes; and interviews with key decision-makers, stakeholders, development interests and community groups involved in the process to understand the extent of changed practices adopted, policy and practice learning achieved, the development of participatory capacity and policy ownership, and satisfaction with the engagement of all stakeholders. This analysis will begin to shed light on the influence of embedded and structural ‘power’ within the process, which previous critiques have highlighted as the key shortcoming of lay knowledge asserting itself over expert knowledge. This analysis will begin to reveal the transformational power of the process on the internal workings of the institution itself. The key lessons from this analysis will inform best practice and wider dissemination within the planning profession.

References:


If you wish to discuss this project further informally, please contact the director of studies (Dr Stephen Essex: s.essex@plymouth.ac.uk). However, applications must be made in accordance with the details shown below.

You can apply via the online application form which can be found at: https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/study/postgraduate and click ‘Apply’.

Please mark it FAO Sharon Healy and clearly state that you are applying for a PhD studentship within the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences and clearly state which project you are applying for.

**General information about applying for a research degree at Plymouth University.**

For more information on the admissions process contact Sharon Healy (sharon.healy@plymouth.ac.uk).

The closing date for applications is 17:00 on 15th September 2015. Shortlisted candidates will be invited for interview. We regret that we may not be able to respond to all applications.