

# Northumbria Research Link

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Carolyn Gibbeson is assistant professor in real estate at Northumbria University

## Let's talk about about our historic built environment

Planning and real estate are forward-looking disciplines concerned with finding new uses for sites and buildings. Students of both are trained to embrace this forward thinking by assessing planning policies, exploring what communities need and identifying demands.

However, identifying the historic significance of our built environment is largely the domain of heritage professionals. Each discipline naturally gains a selectivity or bias which can lead to conflict between stakeholders.

We all work with, and in, the same built environment. So why does it often feel like we are talking about fundamentally different things?

Perhaps in some ways we are. Typically, developers focus on economic value and demand; planners on policy, design and law; and heritage professionals on significance and the potential 'harm' any redevelopment poses.

Conflict arises as each party highlights its area of focus while trying to reach consensus on what should happen with a site. Add the often publicly controversial nature of heritage development and an abundance of meanings and

values will surround a site.

Development or redevelopment occurs at the point where these values and meanings collide and are negotiated. But they may change over time and at different speeds, too, depending on who is looking. Broadly, the community may remember a former use or seek to protect the historic nature of a site; planners know what a site is designated for; and a developer identifies the use that will generate most demand and value.

An awareness of this lack of homogeneity is key to finding a more constructive way through proposed heritage redevelopments. An understanding of stakeholders and their motives, and of sites and their histories, will help identify the investment that each group holds in that site. This would enable the wider history of a site to be investigated.

If parties engage in the past, present and future, a more critical discussion of the site should be possible. In turn, this would allow wider conversations about what happens to our historic built environment, involving each group of stakeholders without compromising the ability to make decisions.

**“Why does it often feel like we are talking about fundamentally different things?”**



Josh Carson is a director of Blackstock Consulting

## Planning by soundbite is no way to manage change

There was a time when policy was pored over, drafted and deliberated. Now, inside the revolving door of No 10, soundbites, slogans and quips are becoming the dominant means of communicating policies.

An age of planning by soundbite might not be a problem if words alone didn't have material weight – but they do: Ashfield, Basingstoke and Deane and Welwyn Hatfield all opted to prolong or scrap local plans on the basis of then-prime minister Truss's proposed upheaval of housing targets.

Beyond undermining an already discretionary system, cursory remarks to limit the Planning Inspectorate's powers, depart from annual housing targets and abolish objective methodologies will undo a decade of incremental progress filling the gap of historic under-delivery.

For all the criticisms of the NPPF, its publication established fundamental principles that have been iteratively worked and reworked over the past decade. The 'rules of engagement' are on paper. Planning professionals

know what to expect from their interactions with councils. There is a general consensus that there have been improvements to the way we plan arising from evidence-based conclusions.

While he was interim housing secretary, Greg Clark remarked that “the NPPF, which I led, galvanised housebuilders, increasing planning permissions from 166,000... to 268,000 within three years” – attesting to the certainty that planning needs and the speed at which the housing crisis can recede if policy is consistent.

We're unlikely to see the end of planning by soundbite with Rishi Sunak. Our new prime minister has said that he'd prevent more green belt releases and relax local plan requirements. Emerging legislation, such as the levelling-up bill, may also see a future on the political scrapheap.

The political imperative may not always be the same as the social. Attention should focus on a long-term, cooperative approach to plan-making. Soundbite or otherwise, a generation is dependent on the conviction of decision-makers to resolve the housing crisis.

**“Planning by soundbite might not be a problem if words alone didn't have material weight, but they do”**



Dan Stone is principal planner at the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE)

## Support for renewables is gathering a following wind

There's change in the air around the public attitude to renewable energy. This really hit home at a village fete in Wellow, in the Cotswolds, where I was promoting a workshop exploring how the area could become more self-sufficient in energy, and what renewable energy developments might be acceptable.

Wellow is a beautiful place; driving up the main street between listed cottages and teenagers on beautifully groomed ponies, I feared we'd got it *very* wrong. Would I be lynched from my own whiteboard?

The workshop is part of an approach to energy planning which has at its heart local communities and their lived experience of their landscape. It reflects CSE's view that the shift to more renewable energy is as much a people problem as a technical one.

I needn't have worried. The villagers I met were open to talking about boosting renewables and considered climate change a given. When tentatively asked to map the places they cherish in their landscape, they cut to the nub instead: “Our

predicted energy bill for 2023 is £8,000. Could we put up a wind turbine?” and “How about a solar array on the paddock?” or “A community owned micro hydro project on the weir” or “Rooftop solar panels on the agricultural sheds on the hilltop.”

In Wellow, we found that making it local is key: how can *this* parish host renewable energy developments to meet *its* energy needs? People care about their local area and want to have their say. Given the opportunity and space, they're able to weigh up landscape protection against the need to generate clean energy.

It remains to be seen whether everyone in the Wellow community shares the views expressed at the fete. But I've never seen such a positive response from a community like this.

Let's not take anything for granted, though. Recent policy shifts could remove restrictions for some renewables, but if councils and the energy industry push through proposals without local support, we'll risk a backlash. Bottom-up community engagement is more important than ever.

**“The shift to more renewable energy is as much a people problem as a technical one”**



Izzie Diment is a transport planner with Paul Basham Associates and member of Thames Valley Young Planners

## Our future utopias are in the hands of young planners

This year's Young Planners' Conference was held in Milton Keynes, the flagship city of the New Towns movement. It's a Marmite sort of place – people tend to either love it or hate it. So it seemed only right that our theme should be ‘Utopia or dystopia?’. For us, the organisers at Thames Valley Young Planners, this was a way of asking questions about what we're planning for and how we ensure planning is doing the things that will create good places to live in the future.

Through our many discussions about the pressures on places, the event reinforced for me just how important planning is for ultimately getting as close to attempting to achieve utopia as we can. It also emphasised just how much net zero is now at the forefront of what we do.

But the conference isn't just about exploring particular themes or ideas. Its purpose is greater than that. A lot of planners who attend are in the early stages of their careers; for them, the conference gives them a really good idea of the kinds of decisions and projects that they will

have the opportunity to get involved with as their careers progress. It offers a chance for them to bond with colleagues from other offices within their respective organisations, as well as talking to other planners from other organisations and sectors.

It's an aspirational event: plenary sessions for everyone, breakouts on specific topics and study tours which make planning ‘real’ show us young planners just what planning can achieve when done well, the hurdles we face in reaching our utopias and what we need to start taking into the future as our careers unfold.

Aside from the sense of achievement I and my colleagues on the steering committee felt, the conference helped to remind me why I got into planning in the first place.

Next year's conference, in Birmingham, will have planning's legacy as its intriguing theme. I'll be there, I hope you will be too.

At the conference, Izzie also spoke to The Planner about health and planning. Watch the video here: [bit.ly/planner1112-health](https://bit.ly/planner1112-health)

**“This conference isn't just about particular themes or ideas. Its purpose is greater than that”**