

COMMUNITY PLANNER

(this article featured in the East Anglian Daily Times in February 2008)

The present planning system is rather like a badly made three legged stool. One leg is represented by local planning authorities who are reinforced by the increasing determination of Central Government to deliver specific planning targets upon us. The second – arguably of equal strength - equates to developers, who are rarely under-financed and always have ready access to high-paid professionals.

By contrast, the third leg – our towns and villages – is much weaker and lacking in influence. This is in no way a criticism of local communities where volunteers and non-planners strive valiantly to shape planning policies and applications to the best interests of their localities.

Rather it is a reflection of the increasing complexity and volume of planning related matters facing them. Nowhere is this truer than now as town and parish councils are being swamped with ‘consultations’ over the new Local Development Frameworks.

So what can be done to rebalance the planning system? The key is to provide local communities with the same level of professional skills and expertise as presently available to councils and developers.

But good planners are not cheap. Therefore, there is a need for a pooling of resources by town and parish councils and others to hire what can be termed ‘community planners’. These planners would be independent of any council or developer, answerable to the communities they represent and would advise them as to how to best articulate their ambitions for their communities within the present planning environment.

Community planners could operate as planners on call, whereby subscribing groups can access their expertise as needed. The Suffolk Preservation Society, working with various other interested bodies, is at the early stages of sketching out how such a scheme might work and how any costs could be kept to a minimum.

The necessary qualities to become a community planner are, however, pretty much self-evident. As well as being a trained professional, a community planner needs to be able to marry together an understanding of the planning system with a willingness to properly appreciate the needs of communities and how those can be inserted into the decision-making process.

The role also demands an ability to be skilful in handling conflict situations and to be persuasive when needed. But most important of all, a community planner needs to have an almost evangelical zeal about the role and to be driven by a fundamental belief in the importance of empowering local communities so that the planning system works for them and not, as seems increasingly.

Clearly, the system needs further refinements, but I’d be interested in hearing readers’ thoughts on the basic proposition. Remember, in order to have a balanced planning

system in Suffolk we need town and parish councils and the communities they represent to be an equal partner with the developers and the planning authorities.

Let's go for it!