

Resilient Infrastructure: How can the public sector plan and deliver more inclusive and sustainable infrastructure?

Public Practice, together with the Greater London Authority (GLA) Infrastructure team, brought together a panel of practitioners to discuss how the public sector can deliver better infrastructure. The timing in early July 2020 made for a topical discussion, hot on the heels of announcements from central government about significant infrastructure investment along with further reforms to planning.

The panel, speaking to an audience of over 130 attendees, was chaired by Phil Graham, Executive Director of Good Growth at the GLA. A wide-ranging discussion explored the role of the public sector in planning and delivering more inclusive infrastructure. For the purpose of this conversation infrastructure was framed as the physical assets and networks underpinning our streets, buildings, places and spaces, our energy, digital and transport networks. Clearly these infrastructures must go hand in hand with social infrastructure such as schools or health facilities. Access to physical and social infrastructure underpins all other aspects of the built environment, and has profound implications on wellbeing and the creation of equitable places.

COMMUNICATING EARLY

Cllr Rachel Blake's experience of the plan-making process as a local politician amplified the importance of communicating clearly and engaging residents in planning as a democratic process. It also highlighted how the fragmented nature of infrastructure delivery can leave communities disappointed if those plans aren't followed through. The public sector must strike a balance between minimising the inconvenience of construction on people's lives, and minimising the disadvantages of people not having access to vital services. There are issues here about empowering and informing communities in the process at the same time as ensuring they have adequate infrastructure provision.

COORDINATING ACROSS SECTORS

Nicola Copen outlined the benefits and long-term efficiencies of effective coordination, drawing on extensive experience of managing multi-utility projects from feasibility to project handover for organisations including UK Power Networks, Thames Water and Ebbsfleet Development Corporation. This is particularly important given the fragmented nature of infrastructure provision. With a mix of partners, suppliers, agencies and organisations from the private and public sectors, stewardship and coordination from Authorities is vital to ensure infrastructure is provided in the public interest.

A MORE DIVERSE UNDERSTANDING OF ENGINEERING

Roma Agrawal is a tireless promoter of engineering, scientific and technical careers to young people and groups that are under-represented in the sector. She highlighted the importance of developing the skills to deliver infrastructure, and attracting a more diverse workforce to help bridge a significant skills gap. This means breaking down stereotypes around engineering, and identifying new role models. STEM subjects should be less specialised and fragmented at degree level, and that there should be fewer barriers between different branches of engineering. In practice, infrastructure relies on the involvement of a wide range of disciplines, and the sector needs to build a better understanding of the variety of these roles and career paths across education and society.

A HAMMER SEES EVERY PROBLEM AS A NAIL

Dan Hill challenged those involved in infrastructure delivery to look beyond infrastructure as the answer and ask again what problems we are trying to solve. For professionals whose business is pouring concrete and building tunnels, the obvious solution is always pouring concrete and building tunnels. Many alternative, iterative and adaptive responses to social or environmental challenges facing cities may be possible, but that demands different ways of thinking. More participatory and incremental approaches may prove more effective, cheaper to deliver, and better at creating wider value for society. The key is not seeing infrastructure as an end in itself, but starting by asking what a place is for, and treating infrastructure as an enabler for the kinds of outcomes we want to see.

It is clear there is no one size fits all solution to delivering more resilient infrastructure. Engagement, coordination, education, training and review are all well established principles that hold true. But we need a more diverse industry that can understand and communicate with the communities most impacted by infrastructure, or a lack of it, to make infrastructure more inclusive. And we need to ask broader questions about the purpose of infrastructure in the first place, as well as the ways we fund, own and manage it, to make infrastructure more sustainable.

SPEAKERS

Phil Graham is Executive Director of Good Growth, Greater London Authority, and formerly Chief Executive of the National Infrastructure Commission.

Cllr Rachel Blake is the Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing at the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and was previously responsible for Regeneration.

Nicola Coppen is a Public Practice Associate placed as Infrastructure Coordinator at the City of Westminster.

Roma Agrawal is a Structural Engineer, Author and Member of the Mayor of London Infrastructure Advisory Panel.

Dan Hill is Director of Strategic Design at Swedish Innovation Agency Vinnova, and formerly an Associate Director at Arup.

The summary of this event is authored by Ben Hockman.

A full recording of this event is available to watch online [here](#).

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