

RUFkit – POTENTIAL USE BY PLANNING CONSULTANTS

The case studies in the research programme were largely initiated by research team member familiar with the tool and its use in a number of organisations. But how attractive would the tool be to those who had not been previously involved in using it? And how effective would the draft website and video be in engaging potential new users?

The original range of potential users in the research programme included Winchcombe Town Council in Gloucestershire. That Council was part way through the preparation of a draft neighbourhood plan under relatively new legislation. The plan had reached the point where different sites needed to be tested for a range of criteria – in order to identify a development strategy best delivering on the aims of sustainable development. At that time, there were also tensions in the community and local residents' groups were dominating the public participation slots at Town Council meetings. From the perspective of the Town Council, it seemed unwise to bring in a new procedure at the stage the process had reached.

Informed by such difficulties, the Gloucestershire Association of Parish and Town Councils convened a training session for parish councillors from across the county. The focus was not on neighbourhood plans as such, but on negotiating the potential community gains when parish councils engaged with developers and landowners in advance of planning applications being made formally to the local planning authority. The training session was very positively reviewed by all attending. Those attending learned a lot from using a game devised by the trainer to illustrate the potential of early negotiation.

The day was designed and led by Andrea Pellegram. She brought a wide range of planning experience; she had been head of minerals and waste planning at Surrey County Council and head of Development Management at Cotswold District Council. In the last few years she had applied this experience to grow community planning activity in the large market town of Cirencester. Feedback from some participants led the trainer to consider whether the game she had used was too complex – and whether all the lessons had been learned about the prioritisation of community gains by town and

parish councils, and about the way that developers would themselves act in a planning negotiation. As with other exercises, there was not enough time to reach satisfactory resolution between the participant “parties”. In the light of post session evaluation, Andrea was open to consider ways of reshaping her participation exercise, and to the potential of RUFkit.

Given her background and how the workshop had gone, Andrea was asked to look at the RUFkit video and website material – and consider whether the “game” approach set out there seemed sufficiently interesting for her to use in future events, or for that matter in the planning authorities that she knew.

Her initial reaction was that consultants would not generally want to use it. In her own current speciality of engaging communities, she would generally start with a “post-it” notes session to collect thoughts about the needs of the community. She would then work to identify where interests could be grouped and which were in conflict. She would not start with a tool driven by landing on different types of space, even for something like a neighbourhood plan where different spaces might have different potentials.

On the other hand, she could see it used as a good training tool at A level. But while it might teach something about master planning prioritisation, in her view it would still not help participants learn how to work with communities.

Drawing on her past experience, she felt that bringing people together where a common strategic policy approach was needed could be a good use of the tool. The tool would force participants to address issues from their different perspectives, before moving on to another challenge. And because the landscape was fictional, even if broadly reflecting the reality of the region, there was also the benefit that participants would be working in a safe space. There were no real decisions to make, and no specifics. As such, RUFkit could be a tool to enable participants to develop different personal approaches to the consideration of planning policy development.

Just as development management was very different from forward planning, the application of the tool to strategic planning was more easy to envisage than any application to formal decision making. Pressed, she could see that as local planning authorities continued

shedding staff to meet financial targets, more accountability for decision making might be devolved to communities – through neighbourhood plans, community plans or other processes. She noted that too often, local councillors did not have sufficient training in land use policy development to be able to understand how to make the most effective decisions. In this context, she could see how the tool could be used to help local communities understand strategic decision making – rather than approaching each development management decision from first principles and from a negative starting point.

She also thought that the tool could be used, especially if local councils and others became familiar with it, to test scenarios at each stage of a local plan process. In parish and town councils, however, there might well be difficulties of discipline; past decisions might be reopened and results might not stick – especially if the tool was seen as a hypothetical game rather than a real assistant. Even so, it would be possible to establish a game board where the results of a previous brainstorm and strategy approach were worked into the playing board; then the dice would bring the team to a playing space where their policy is the starting point and the card read “Now, a developer has approached in respect of this site and wants to... what do you do?”.

Even then, it would be necessary in serious plan-making to ensure that every space on the board was tested – in which case the dice would determine only the order of considering issues rather than selecting a few at random in kind of road test.

Andrea concluded with views that local development plans in the UK were probably too complex to be tested by RUFkit. Local Plan policies are generally designed to anticipate all potential development impacts and, where not site-specific, are meant to be applicable across all land in anticipation of different development impacts. And yet, such plans are sometimes not fit for purpose, because it is hard to hypothesise future planning applications – especially as economies and communities change over time. Was there, she wondered, a role for RUFkit in assessing the need to update plans – where the plan was in place and councillors were convened to address a series of challenging, hypothetical applications, before deciding the main priority areas for updating? She suggested that if this were the case, it would be necessary to

reconsider national guidance on plan preparation, and consider how RUFkit might be employed in the early stages of plan review, such as the issues and options phase.

In conclusion, RUFkit might not be attractive to planning consultants because the game-playing approach is too random to deal with the complex issues around a specific development or the preparation of a land-use policy approach, whether a neighbourhood plan or a Local Plan. However, there may be valuable applications of the RUFkit methodology as a training tool. It may for instance be desirable to develop a game that trains elected councillors in learning how to analyse their local areas spatially, and to develop skills in identifying land use planning impacts that may arise in various scenarios. It may also be possible to develop a game that aids strategic consideration of broad land use policy issues in the early stages of plan development, particularly in the consideration of impacts and options for future policy direction.