

Ann Skippers, RTPI 2010 President

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Any incoming President finds themselves in awe of the distinguished names and legacies of past Presidents. And I am deeply honoured and very humbled to have been given the opportunity to represent you in this way. The RTPI is an organisation that I am immensely proud to be associated with.

When I was a little girl, my family lived in Scotland, in a small village about an hour or so north of Glasgow. We lived next door to the local doctor, who lived in a big house with a large garden.

One day, playing in the garden on the other side of the hedge, things began to happen – builders arrived and stakes were knocked into the ground. I watched rather nosily through the hedge, as the building took shape, transfixed by this thing emerging up from the ground... someone had made something; someone had created this; and this would be someone's home. I was completely hooked. I wanted to know who decided whether this new house could be built. Who decided that it was ok? How did you make that judgement?

And this early fascination has never left me.

I'm not sure whether any of you have had a similar photograph album, but I have an album that documented my life with a photo taken on each birthday and friends, favourite games, inoculations and so on, recorded annually, right up to the age of 21. Dad and I spent many happy hours every year, filling the album in, and it has proved to be a very precious keepsake.

It has always amazed me that, at age 16, whilst other interests are listed as discos and beach parties – well, we did live in Mallorca – I was obviously as single minded then as I am now... it's written down in black and white – my ambition was to be a town planner.

This ambition evolved from that early fascination with the world around me and the nurturing of teachers, particularly geography teachers. So how might we capture that imagination at an early age?

One of the areas I will be focusing on is working with schools. This is an area which is very dear to my heart, as I've been lucky enough to do some teaching on planning courses at various universities and for the Open University, too.

In common with many of you, I have been to schools' career evenings and, of course, quickly found out that the kids were interested in three things:

- the qualifications needed to become a planner,
- how interesting the job is, you know, what a typical day might be and
- how much they would be paid.

My answer was always the same:

- the qualities needed are common sense and nosiness...
- there is no such thing as a typical day... and
- whilst more is always welcome, the money's ok.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could develop a project-based initiative to take into schools, at primary as well as secondary level, that helped people to better understand what planning is about, to capture that fascination that I'm sure young children have, to generate enthusiasm about planning?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if other professionals would join in with us?

What great local publicity that would create too.

By doing this, we might capture young people's imaginations and inspire the next generation of planners.

I thought it would be interesting to share some thoughts from Wilfred Burns, who was President in 1967, the year I was born. Sir Wilfred was a leading planning figure, City Planning Officer of Newcastle, a member of the influential Planning Advisory Group and went on to become Chief Planner, cutting his Presidential year short to take up that role. In his Presidential address, he urged us not to be afraid of fighting for town planning and the role of the chartered town planner. Here I am, forty years on, going to say pretty much the same thing.

Planning has been taken for granted for too long, by too many. Today, we are facing immense challenges – an economic recession, climate change, an uncertain political future – as we move towards a general election. But these are challenges which every sector is facing. The difference is that we can offer solutions.

From the Institute's very humble beginnings, when a group of architects, surveyors, engineers and lawyers came together to form the new profession of town planning, Thomas Adams, our first President, recognised there was a need for ideas and imagination to fuse with more technical competencies, and that by bringing together all these different skills, better solutions would be found.

This year, I particularly hope to build on our existing relationships with our colleagues in our sister professions, making sure that we work closely with RICS, RIBA and ICE and others.

Sir Wilfred, too, urged us to constantly look forward into the field of professional cooperation, saying this would often need patience and goodwill. A friend, whose surname happens also to be Goodwill, urged me to seek sponsorship for a series of inter-professional round-tables. I promised to see what I could do. And so, with more than a passing nod to Sir Wilfred and my friend Roger for his good idea, I hope to start a series of round-tables with our fellow professionals – to be known as the goodwill series – and I aim to start with a round-table on inclusive design and accessibility.

This leads me on to the third thing that I particularly wish to focus on this year.

The image of planning and the public perception of it is something which has dogged us through the ages.

There is no doubt that people have a raw interest in their locality, their doorstep – just think of how people galvanise and come together when there is a proposal or scheme they don't want in their area. Interest, passion and drive are therefore alive and well. But can we harness these things and turn them into a positive?

One of the biggest challenges we face is how to connect the local interest in planning with the bigger picture stuff – strategic planning. Just think for a moment of our transport system, our infrastructure, services or energy supply. We need to continue to make the case for national spatial planning, for plans at an appropriate scale and long term planning, which is so critical to this country's future well being.

But we need to seek new ways of capturing and harnessing the raw interest in planning and connecting it to the bigger picture. I am reminded of my old school motto, which is "knowledge is the key to understanding". Through knowledge of the rationale behind a policy, legislation or regulations, comes understanding – understanding of planning and its potential.

Having worked at the coal face in local government, and now as a consultant, I know how difficult this can be. I am merely an ordinary planner, but planning is extraordinary and we need to get this message across. We should be proud to say at the dinner party, when we are asked, that we are planners. Say it well and say it loudly and say it again if you need too.

For me, once asked and the role explained, people do get it, people say how exciting it sounds – they didn't realise that that was what we do.

Sometimes called jack of all trades, we have so many different facets to our make up, it's not surprising that there are lots of people out there doing planning, calling themselves planners, who aren't members of this Institute. We must ensure that the added value of being a member of this Institute, and in particular, of being a chartered town planner, is recognised. Let's really demonstrate to our members what it means to be able to call yourself chartered town planner.

But how will we make these things happen? As a planning consultant and a planning inspector, I am living my dream... I am still peeping over walls and fences and peering nosily through hedges, to see what's going on on the other side. We are here in this room because we passionately believe in planning.

There is one Institute, with lots of component parts. Individuals can and do, make an enormous difference. We, here today, have decided to put our heads above the parapet. You have inspired, cajoled, challenged and supported the Institute. Singly and together, we can encourage others to become involved and make a difference. Most of us are happy to be asked to do something, to make a contribution because we feel valued. We must ensure that all of our members feel valued and motivated to get involved, and stay involved, and encourage others to get involved.

And what about our staff?

A committed group of individuals, who have worked flat out, often in uncertain circumstances and turbulent times.

Thank you all for keeping the show on the road.

So let's continue to do what the Institute has always done, but let's do it with pride, and increased confidence. Let's stand up for planning. Let's fight for planning. Let's embed the concept of planning in our youngsters, so that it becomes the bedrock of our future. Let's share its successes with an often sceptical public and let's show the potential of planning to our politicians. Let's use our imagination. Let's show our members we mean business. Let's be stronger and bolder than we have ever been before. Let's work with others. Let's pay homage to our past and great traditions. Let's let in the new and bold. It's time to stand up for planning. Thank you.