

Idea exchange finds favour

Dialogue with experts in other countries is going to be important for future practice in UK planning, insists **Robin Hambleton**

The cross-national exchange of ideas on city planning and public policy has accelerated in recent years. On the whole, this can be regarded as a good thing.

Foreign experience can challenge received wisdom and spur fresh thinking. Better still, it may lead to improvements in planning practice in many countries. That is why the creation of global planners web-site www.globalplannersnetwork.org following discussion at last year's World Urban Forum is so welcome.

The view that "all this foreign stuff is of no consequence to UK practitioners" can be countered by reference to a current example of cross-national exchange — the debate over new urbanism. Housing areas designed according to US new urbanism principles are springing up in places such as Upton near Northampton and Ravenswood, a new suburb of Ipswich.

Deputy prime minister John Prescott has been an enthusiast for transatlantic exchange. He was impressed by the US new urbanist developments he visited in 2003 and 2004. Since then he has led a drive to introduce new urbanist thinking into UK planning. He wants people to live closer together rather than sprawling across the countryside and he wants to see better-quality urban development.

Prescott has made it clear that US experience with new urbanism was a powerful stimulus to fresh thinking in the former ODPM and elsewhere. Clearly, cross-national exchange can influence planning practice, not just the rhetoric about practice. In an era of rapid global communication, policy innovations can now ripple across national frontiers at great speed.

Whatever the merits and drawbacks of new urbanism, the debate helps to spotlight the significance of cross-national policy transfer in planning and local governance. But why should busy policy-makers bother to find time to look abroad? Richard Rose offers some answers in his book *Learning from Comparative Public Policy: A Practical Guide*, which talks about "instrumental learning".

Rose argues that policy makers seek fresh ideas not for their own sake but to promote political satisfaction. This lays down a significant challenge. Comparative planning research is an expanding field, but when it is limited to advancing understanding it falls short of instrumental learning. Cross-national lesson drawing requires researchers to go beyond description and analysis and offer evidence-based advice to policy-makers.

There are four main reasons why planners should devote more time to instrumental learning from abroad. Firstly, as



Baltimore: hidden potential of rundown docks used to successfully reinvent harbour as a leisure and tourist destination

Rose notes, it can focus on accomplishments in another setting. This can provide a better basis for policy innovation than making up ideas and speculating about what might happen if they were adopted.

Secondly, in a rapidly globalising world, citizens expect professionals to be up to date with the latest developments, wherever they take place. Information, people and money now flow almost effortlessly across national frontiers in the worlds of science, business, the arts and culture. Why should public policy be walled into national enclaves?

Thirdly, planners operate in an increasingly multicultural world. Examining experience in other countries can enhance the cultural competence of politicians and professionals by exposing them to different ways of doing things. Finally, common problems do not produce an identical response. Differences in the responses that governments make to common problems can offer powerful and compelling insights for theory and practice.

There are pitfalls to avoid in cross-national learning. However, if the process of transfer is handled carefully, lessons from overseas can provide substantial gains for UK planning practice. That is why professional planners should be paying more attention to cross-national policy transfer.

Local history and traditions need to be taken into account if cross-national policy transfer is to succeed



Upton: housing areas designed according to American new urbanism principles

In making this case for a more international outlook I am not suggesting that planners should engage in a global search for best practice. Culture and local context are critical in public policy-making. Policies that might be popular in Sweden could bomb in the USA. Local history, traditions and power structures need to be taken into account if cross-national policy transfer is to succeed.

It is helpful to distinguish two broad though overlapping approaches — the informal and the formal. Informal transfers happen when individuals take notice of experience in another country and use the insights they gain to influence their practice. This form of transfer may not be that well documented, but it has been part of urban planning practice for centuries.

The stunning urban space at the heart of the hill town of Pienza in Tuscany is an early example of cross-national transfer. In 1459 Pope Pius II decided to redevelop

the town's central area to create an ensemble of buildings and spaces exemplifying Renaissance perfection. Before he was elected to the papacy in 1458, Pius travelled extensively in Europe and he clearly brought his international experience to bear on the designs for Pienza.

The aisles in the cathedral are the same height as the nave. This design follows a model from northern Europe. The result is a Tuscan cathedral with an unusually light, airy interior. Outside, the harmony of space and volume created by the buildings is breathtaking. Planners and architects from around the world visit Pienza to learn from a classic example of how to create spaces that integrate effortlessly with the existing urban fabric.

Formal cross-national learning is more systematic than the informal approach. It involves a national, regional or city government explicitly setting out to examine experience in another country to generate

How the enterprise zone concept was taken further than originally intended before being discarded

An example of policy transfer that falls short of institutional redesign but has still been very influential is provided by enterprise zones, which have become a leading UK urban planning export.

Invented by Professor Peter Hall in 1977, enterprise zones were intended to encourage the private sector to get stuck into blighted neighbourhoods. Firms inside the zones would receive tax relief and be freed from the "burdens" of planning control and other regulations. Hall made it clear that his idea should be viewed as an "extremely last-ditch solution" to be tried "only on a very small scale".

Blind to the subtlety of his argument, Tory ministers snapped up elements of the concept and pushed it into UK legislation in 1980. Some 25 zones were designated over the next five years, including the enormous London Docklands zone. Subsequent research showed that the cost per job generated was prohibitive.



London Docklands: enterprise zone established to advance area's regeneration

Despite his reputation as a free market extremist, Conservative environment secretary Nicholas Ridley decided to drop the policy in 1987. But the lack of evidence to support the

performance of enterprise zones did not stop president Ronald Reagan importing them to the USA in the early 1980s. While never passed into federal law, many US states have

enacted enterprise zone legislation.

In different guises, the concept has spread across continents like wildfire. "Special economic zones" are to be found in China, India, Poland, Kazakhstan, the Philippines and Russia. In the 1990s, prime minister Alain Juppe imported the idea into France and designated 44 zones.

Last year George Bush, in his stunningly inadequate response to the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and surrounding areas, argued for the creation of a "Gulf opportunity zone" that would enjoy a series of tax incentives and other measures designed to encourage economic development.

It could be argued that the enterprise zone experience should put us off cross-national policy transfer for good. A more sensible response is to recognise the value of cross-national learning while exercising caution in the way that it is applied.

specific lessons for its practice. The focus for transfer varies considerably, reflecting different degrees of difficulty in effecting a successful transfer.

In its simplest form, drawing lessons might focus on specific technical measures. Examining alternative approaches to the design of highway speed controls could be seen as a mainly professional exercise. Exchange on nitty-gritty issues of this kind may not hit the headlines but it can lead to significant improvements in the built environment.

When cross-national learning moves up to the level of policy, the challenges are greater. Deciding whether London's congestion charge would be good for New York moves the transfer process into highly contested political territory. Established core values about car use and the role of the state would need to be re-examined. Powerful stakeholders on both sides could be expected to join the fray in a flash.

At the highest level, the focus for transfer is institutional. Here policy-makers ask whether the design of the institutional

arrangements they have in place to govern society need to be reconsidered. So leaders may ask how cities and metropolitan regions are planned and governed in other countries and whether they can draw lessons for the institutional design of urban government in their own nations.

A good example of institutional cross-national transfer is provided by the Labour government's approach to the redesign of political management structures in local government after the 1997 general election. Spurred on by Tony Blair's enthusiasm for directly elected mayors and stronger leadership models, civil servants set out to explore local government arrangements in other countries.

Ministers were genuinely interested in learning about alternative approaches to urban governance. US experience with elected mayors and city managers directly influenced the drafting of the UK's legislation in the late 1990s because ministers took the trouble to read about and debate these models.

But the Local Government Act 2000,

which introduced directly elected mayors and other new leadership models to English local government, was not just a copy of US practice. Ministers such as Hilary Armstrong and Nick Raynsford worked hard not just to learn from abroad but also to create a distinctively home-grown approach to local government institutions. The models on the statue book are unique.

Experience over the past 20 years suggests that in making the most of cross-national learning, at least three things need to happen. First, we need a marked increase in sophisticated policy evaluation research. Policy-makers need to know more about the performance of different approaches. While there is a growing policy evaluation industry in most western democracies, "prospective evaluation" is still relatively neglected.

In the context of cross-national policy transfer, prospective evaluation involves trying to assess what would happen if an approach from another country were adopted. This may be intellectually challenging but it is not beyond us. It requires

understanding of the policy setting, including power relations, as well as the policy.

Second, planning practitioners and academics should reconsider the focus of their research efforts. All those concerned to improve urban and regional planning practice should ask whether enough of their research capacity is being devoted to prospective evaluation. More specifically, they could ask how much serious effort they are putting into drawing instrumental lessons from abroad.

Last but not least, the government and its various research agencies need to reconsider present policies. The outdated research assessment exercise needs to be replaced with an incentive system for universities that brings about a step change in the level of applied multidisciplinary research directed to improving the quality of life in the short term.

Robin Hambleton is dean of the college of urban planning and public affairs at the University of Illinois in Chicago and visiting professor of city management at the University of the West of England.

How UK cities have drawn on an American model for successfully regenerating waterside destinations

A modern example of informal policy transfer is provided by the waterside approach to urban renewal.

In the 1960s and 1970s, urban planners tended to neglect the decaying harbours and canals located in the central areas of many cities. These eyesores were often seen as relics of a bygone era. New urban development tended to turn its back on the water.

Donald Schaefer, mayor of Baltimore from 1971 to 1986, deserves credit for seeing the hidden potential of the city's rundown docks as a focus for urban regeneration. The successful reinvention of the Inner Harbor as a major leisure and tourist



Bristol: waterside redevelopment owes much to lessons from Baltimore example

destination is now something of an urban planning legend in the USA.

The Baltimore experience had a major impact not just on planning practice in other US cities but also in

the UK. For example, the creative and successful redevelopment around Bristol's Floating Harbour owes much to lessons from Baltimore.

High-quality urban design, attention

to the shaping of public spaces, ensuring access to the waterfront, mixing uses in buildings, bringing public and private stakeholders together and renovating important old buildings in a creative way are all features of the approach adopted in Baltimore that have been exported to many UK cities.

Indeed, this approach to waterside renewal has now become mainstream practice in the UK. In a shrinking world with young as well as more senior planners travelling extensively, we can expect informal cross-national policy transfer to mushroom in the future. This holds great promise for the improvement of planning practice.