

August 2019

## LOOKING BACK HELPS – SOMETIMES

At RML our anniversary came around again on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2019 so we have just started our 36<sup>th</sup> year in business. It was also on 01<sup>st</sup> August, but in 1972, that I started a new phase of my civil engineering career when I left the water department in the City of Cardiff Corporation where I was a resident engineer supervising the construction of a new treatment works. I joined with friends in a young consultancy that was engaged almost exclusively in dealing with derelict land. I volunteered to take on the work that had been commissioned in North Wales as well as a few projects along the Heads of the Valleys Road in South Wales. These projects in North Wales involved slate quarries and slate mines and abandoned coal mines too. Metalliferous mines soon followed. That step into consultancy, which I have never regretted, was an important one as things turned out, but you know careers can only be viewed in retrospect. 1972 is a long time ago and since then the environment in which civil engineers work has changed out of all recognition. On reflection I seem to have been involved in encouraging many of those changes.

The changes I am talking about were triggered by an emerging opportunity that involved learning to work with specialists such as ecologists and landscape architects who were being brought into engineering circles for the first time. They were not very welcome in some quarters. Learning to work with nature has been very important to me and a thing that I have been happy to both talk about and write about. Challenges and opportunities characterise the wide range of topics and activities that we are now involved in.

Looking back I can say that year 35 has been a good one at RML. Our turnover has grown substantially again and our staff strength has increased too, but not just in number. We have been joined by people with extensive experience of working in a multi-disciplined world and we have some interesting projects for them to be getting on with. Strangely though, after several years when we won not a single highway job, 2019 has found us working on 7 highway improvements to trunk roads, with 6 of them in North Wales. It will be several years before any of them have been completed but it is good to think that connectivity across North Wales will be improved step by step and that this will have a positive impact on businesses and countryside wellbeing.

Business is a strange and often a trying world to be in. The demise of Carillion dealt us a blow early in 2018, but not too big a blow because Carillion had been paying us very promptly. We had already started work on the Wylfa Newydd nuclear power plant by then and we had a busy time there that we hoped would increase significantly in 2019 – but obviously this has turned out not to be the case. Despite all of these events the last 12 months have been interesting, worthwhile and busy.

Why do highway projects raise so many issues that need to be addressed in great detail and, as a further complication, are time related too because of their seasonal nature?

My response to my own question is that we live in a relatively crowded island and in Wales especially our environment is not only extremely varied but is well understood and valued. I heard it said many years ago that because of its complexity Wales is one of the most intensively studied bits of the earth's surface. Just think of where the basic stratigraphy in geology was sorted out, and reflect that long before the Romans came for our gold we were exporting lead ore from the Great Orme near Llandudno. This mineral wealth has been exceptional and sits alongside ecosystems and landscapes that are as jumbled together as the stratigraphy of Cambrian Ordovician and Silurian systems to say nothing of the Carboniferous and what followed that.

So at RML we are intent on looking ahead, leading and learning and building on success.

We have noticed how environmental issues can amount to about 30% of total design fees on projects these days. Our focus is twofold, assessing and reporting on the character of a site in sufficient clarity and easing the contractor's path to completion within the confines of regulation and public perception. Wellbeing now sits in the forefront of our thinking. Looking after things such as best practice as well as fauna and flora are important because they are relevant to everyone's wellbeing, including designers and contractors.

Being in business is a marathon rather than a sprint.

Ivor

## IDRIS SPELLS OUT A HOME TRUTH

'There is always more bad business around than good business'.

I don't know who said that but I think it was quite a long time ago and whoever did say it must have had a bad experience or possibly several bad experiences. There are a great many people in business, especially in the construction industry today, who are going through bad times. The cartoon epitomises just one example of how things can get from bad to worse

Bidding for work and winning work on price alone has been with us since the 1980s when Mrs Thatcher said that public sector work done by consultants must be awarded to those offering the lowest price. Only recently I quoted a member of staff at No. 10 saying that in respect of outsourcing they still expected the highest quality along with the lowest price and this in spite of some very bad experiences. Thankfully procurement in some parts of the public sector is changing since at long last John Ruskin's comment about not getting a lot if you only pay a little has been having some impact on thinking.

Yet another established construction firm went into receivership in early August and it didn't even make the news despite their turnover being around £50million/year. An analysis of the event by someone who knows the industry commented on how jobs won on the thinnest of margins, or any margin at all, can spell disaster because of contractual problems and the rising cost of labour and materials.

Some bids for work in the public sector now place much greater emphasis on the quality of the bidder and the bid. Price is less significant. But how does one measure quality? Reputation is hard earned and should surely count for something.

A reputation for doing good work to time and within budget is the most valuable thing that a firm possesses.

Warren Buffet has said that for him damaging his firm's reputation was the most heinous crime that would entail immediate dismissal of any employee found to have been responsible for such an occurrence. Apparently Warren also said that mistakes were acceptable provided that they weren't repeated and he of all people is highly regarded as a business man of exceptional quality. What he says is usually well worth listening to and then applying if you can.

Invitations to bid for work and then winning work on the basis of one's reputation still applies in the private sector. Perhaps we are fortunate in that we certainly have experience of this in the public sector too where on the basis of previous work we were the only firm asked to quote for some specialist work.

Idris

## THE MAIN THING

'The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing' (allegedly an old German saying)

Despite the occasional horror stories about people doing or allowing things to be done that harm our environment I have confidence that in most circumstances people will do the right thing because the right thing to do is to do the right thing - respect nature. The application of our knowledge about how nature works has changed so much in the last 40 years because the boundaries between disciplines and between professions have been blurred. In addition 'people' now recognise the impact which the quality of the environment has on the quality of their lives and expect to see their surroundings respected, protected and enhanced.

Engineers have been carried along on this wave of environmental consciousness, some most willingly, others far from willingly if at all. In the old days site investigations for engineering purposes used to be so restricted in what we looked for, we always wanted to 'look deeper' down a hole but never thought much about looking around. This narrow (or deep) focus has been overtaken by site characterisation which I mentioned in 'Stamp collecting' in May. This much wider understanding of what is 'going on' in and around a site is determined because of a multidisciplinary approach in which 'environmentalists' (what an awful word) play an important part. 'As a consequence I feel that natural sciences are in a much better place because of that, they are seen to be of value and have a role to play in society rather than just seen as collections of information of interest to only a few people. The construction industry is in a much better place for it too since working with nature improves both the industry's acceptance by the public and future business for individuals working in the industry. Self-interest is no bad thing in some circumstances.

If [Jonathan Self](#) were to ask me if I feel better personally for this multidisciplinary approach then yes I certainly do.

Our work developing proposals for new and improved highways brings us in front of people by way of Public Information Exhibitions which are organised by the design team on behalf of the Welsh Assembly. When a preferred solution for a project has been adopted a variety of methods are used to explain what the project involves, so photographs, annotated drawings and a 'fly-through' will figure in public exhibitions local to the site of the works. Members of the design team are required to attend these vents which will extend of a few days. Coming face-to-face with people who will be directly affected by the work is important in developing one's skills in presentation, explanation and defence of your work but this exposure allows one to glean satisfaction from an outsider and allows one to feel better. Jonathan Self thinks that your professional work and business ethics should be of a quality that allows you to 'feel better about yourself'.

Ivor

## **LONG TERM, NEXT GENERATION PLANNING - WALES 2020 TO 2040 AND NORTH WALES. WHAT'S NEW?**

In my previous newsletter, I highlighted key updates for planning policies and plans in Wales this year. One of these is the replacement of the Wales 'Spatial Plan' with a new 'National Development Framework', or NDF for short. Both documents aim to set out a long-term strategic land-use plan for Wales, not an easy task as the

First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford notes: *'it is difficult to imagine how the world might look in 2040'* (NDF Consultation draft August 2019).

### **Draft Wales 'NDF' for consultation**

The Welsh Government (WG) has now published a draft Wales '**NDF**' for consultation with a response 'window' until the **1<sup>st</sup> November 2019**: <https://gov.wales/draft-national-development-framework>

All landowners, developers and their professional advisors should be aware of the potential land use changes and their implications for the next twenty years as part of the NDF.

Some would highlight that the publication of a draft NDF marks a key stage in the WG's aim for delivering a specific, and perhaps a more successful, planning system for Wales for the next generation

### **What is the NDF?**

Put simply, the NDF sets out *'what we need to think about when planning things like houses, buildings and power supplies'*

The NDF sets out a spatial framework for the focus for investment for infrastructure and developments in Wales i.e. *how it will grow*, and guides the next level of plans: the **Strategic Development Plans (SDPs)** at a regional level, and the **Local Development Plans (LDPs)** at the local authority level.

The NDF highlights 11 goals for the next 20 years and comments on several existing strengths and challenges.

### **The NDF implications for North Wales**

The NDF sub- divides Wales into 3 regions – **North Wales**, Mid and South West Wales and South East Wales, with each of these to work towards an SDP.

**The North Wales Region** is to include • Conwy • Denbighshire • Flintshire • Gwynedd • Isle of Anglesey • Snowdonia National Park • Wrexham.

The NDF defines the following policies for the North Wales Region:

17

We support focusing development around Wrexham and Deeside.

18

We support managed growth in the towns and cities along the coast from Caernarfon to Deeside.

19

We support new green belt areas that connect with ones in Cheshire West and Chester.

20

We support development of Holyhead Port. This includes attracting cruise ships.

**i** Green belt – an area of open land where you're not allowed to build.

22

We support North West Wales as a location for new energy development and investment.

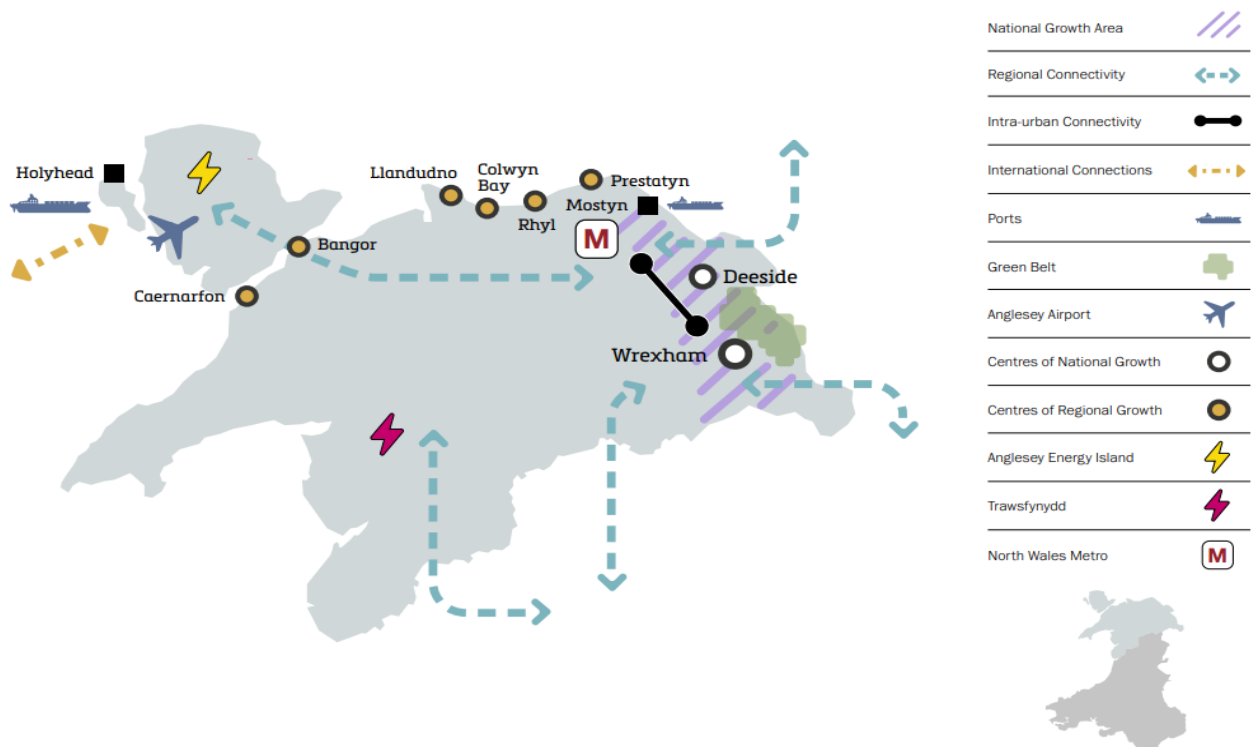
Applications for nuclear energy generating stations will consider:

- the need for non-renewable energy
- the natural and historic environment
- the economic benefits to the region

21

We want to improve transport links to NW England. This includes plans for the North Wales Metro.

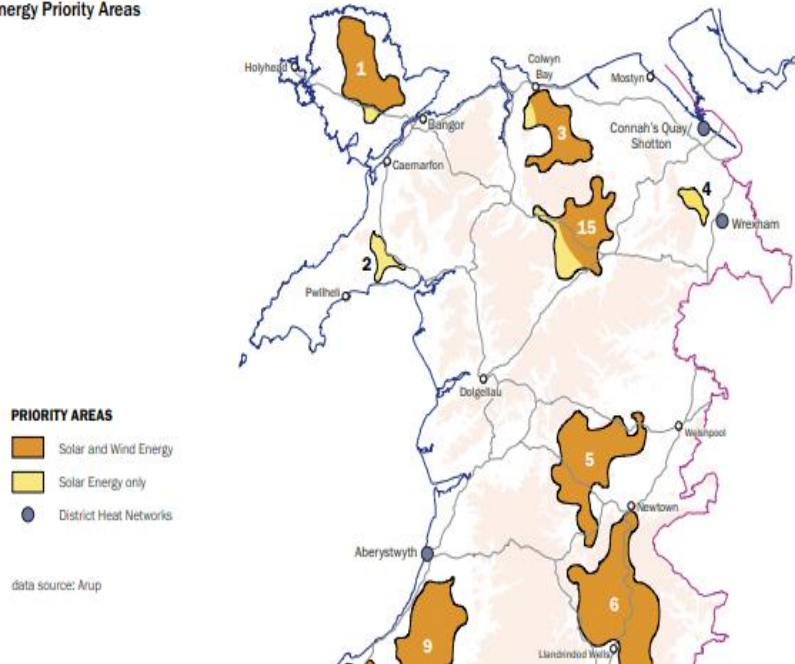
### The Regions



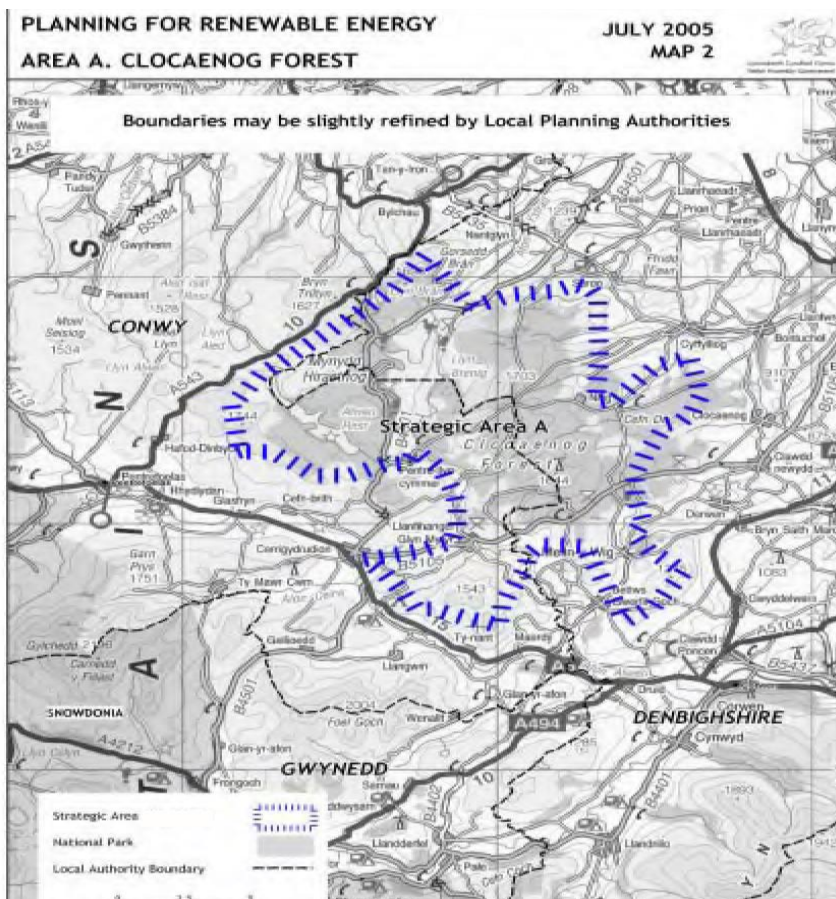
Here at RML we'll be particularly interested in a proposed North Wales 'Metro' and the 'connections' that this could include.

At this consultation stage the North Wales region NDF also includes Welsh Government proposed **Energy Priority Areas for Wales**: these areas are identified in a separate NDF map, copied below:

Wales Energy Priority Areas



The Wales Energy Priority Areas are proposed to replace the current WG Technical Advice Note 8 ‘Planning for Renewable Energy Strategic Areas (2005)’. TAN8 included the Clocaenog Forest ‘Strategic Area A’ (SSA) shown here:





The NDF Energy Priority Area shown expands the TAN8 area, giving the **additional potential for wind and solar energy developments** along the A5 corridor and in areas bordering the existing SSA.

***NDF additional information, details, contacts and events.***

The consultation documents includes a helpful 'easy read version': <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2019-08/Easy%20Read%20version.pdf>

and a young person's summary: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2019-08/Young%20people%27s%20summary.pdf>

The Welsh Government are holding **drop in sessions** in main public libraries throughout Wales. These are based on booking a slot with them ([ndf@gov.wales](mailto:ndf@gov.wales) 0300 025 3261 or 0300 025 1543) and three sessions proposed for North Wales:

- Bangor 10 September: 2pm to 6.30pm
- Wrexham 2 October: 1pm to 6pm
- Colwyn Bay 10 October: 2pm to 5pm

**The Royal Town Planning Institute Cymru** is holding a panel and discussion meeting on the NDF and a focus on North Wales on **Tuesday 1 October 2.00pm - 4.00pm** at Station Court, 41-43 Station Road, Colwyn Bay LL29 8BP. Places are free for RTPI members (£20.00 for non-RTPI members) but advance registration is required and places are limited. Bookings should be made via: [georgina.roberts@rtpi.org.uk](mailto:georgina.roberts@rtpi.org.uk)

Does the NDF or the Energy Priority Area affect you or your business? If you need assistance to submit a response on the NDF consultation document, please contact me:

**Shân Wyn Jones MRTPI**

PROGRESS, PROGRESS, PROGRESS

'When you destroy a blade of grass  
You poison England at her roots'

These are more words from [Gordon Bottomley's](#) poem about ironfounders which I quoted from in my note about pioneer plants in Jul last year. Gordon died in the 1940s so he did not experience the changes that were triggered in the 1970s by people like [Nan Fairbrother](#) who produced her most seminal work when she wrote about 'New lives new landscapes' in 1971. Her book contained the seeds of change which would see the environment feature in everyday thinking for a great many people. It's sad to relate that a few disasters accelerated the rate at which we acknowledged that the environment in which we spend our days really does have a marked influence on the quality of our lives. I dare say that the Grenfell disaster will have the same effect. I cannot help mentioning Aberfan because it had such an impact on my own life. Aberfan pushed forward my thinking about how our lack of concern for the environment was degrading the lives of people. Communities had been degraded by a lack of concern by others for the quality of life enjoyed by the residents. I consider myself most fortunate to have been able to do something about these situations.

The South Wales communities that I grew up in in the 1950s were confident and vibrant after the war was over, it seemed to me that everyone was busy. They were commercially vibrant communities for sure but when viewed from this distance were lacking many things that now figure in what people regard as wellbeing. People

were having to put up with some dreadful things. Pit-head baths were a rarity, when they did arrive many men refused to use them. The Phurnacite plant making smokeless fuel in Aberaman was a polluter as bad as anything in Eastern Europe, grass and every other kind of vegetation had been destroyed on the hillside which was downwind of the works. Grass and trees had fled for sure and people were living in the middle of this. The river Cynon flowed black and coal tips disfigured the landscape. The Cynon valley looks totally different today. After the Phurnacite plant was closed grass and trees soon returned in Aberaman, the river is free of coal dust and passenger train services have been restored. Abercynon has a bypass!

I have said before that progress made as a result of disasters is littered throughout history in the UK. The 'big stink' in the 19th century is one that springs to mind and made the MPs think about what was being done to the River Thames and their environment immediately outside the Palace of Westminster. The stink persuaded the MPs that emptying vast quantities of raw sewage into the Thames was not doing them or the residents of London any favours. It is happening again with the construction of the Thames Tideway Tunnel now that Bazalgette's sewers are overloaded because of the huge increase in the population of London.

Civil engineers and the construction industry in general can claim that progress has been made in applying a deeper knowledge of nature to practices in civil engineering. Environmental specialists have a valuable role to play and some at least are no longer 'stamp collectors', as they all once were. They are valued members of our team. One can still come across horror stories such as a woodland full of red squirrels being approved for felling but mercifully stopped before the felling had got too far. That event shows how far we have travelled since Gordon observed how uncaring people were about nature.

Ivor

55 WELL STREET, RUTHIN, DENBIGHSHIRE LL15 1AF

Tel +44(0)1824 704366, Fax +44(0)1824 705450

email: [rml@rmlconsult.com](mailto:rml@rmlconsult.com) web: [www.rmlconsult.com](http://www.rmlconsult.com)

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