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SQUEEZING A QUART FROM A PINT POT IS GOOD PRACTICE

Offering two for the price of one is a common tactic in retailing, and not necessarily as straight forward as one might think. 'Two for one' is a bit unusual in engineering circles but what you see is what you get in an engineer's world. 'Value for money' has been one of my guiding principles in establishing new landscapes on regraded industrial land where, long before I got involved, 'Grass the forerunner of life had fled' according to [Gordon Bottomley](#). Gordon was an early writer on environmental issues and I mentioned Gordon in a newsletter last month.

Grass was usually absent in any meaningful quantity on derelict sites that I used to visit because the environment was generally inhospitable for plants. The sites were not terribly welcoming to people either. These sites sloped steeply and being largely bare of vegetation were prone to surface erosion and an unstable surface was not a place where seedlings and young plants could develop to any reasonable size. The surfaces were very dry too and generally any plants quickly dried out and died off if they weren't washed away. Nutrient levels were low and anyway in the case of metalliferous mine wastes the metal content in the wastes rendered them toxic. Little wonder then that grass along with a good many other things had fled.

What to do about the situation that faced us was one question that had to be answered and another was what about the cost of the work. We were also asked 'to green the place up'.

I have mentioned before that we received good advice from Professor Bradshaw at Liverpool University about how some plants could survive in harsh conditions. He told us about pioneer plants. The idea that some plants were real pioneers was new and breath-taking to me and my team of engineers. Tony explained how these pioneers would suit our purpose. "You mean that some plants will grow in almost anything" we said. "Oh yes" he replied and went on, "Provided that the physical conditions are right, and your choice of vegetation is right, the plants will grow and you can add whatever you want by way of nutrients to manage the rate of growth". All we wanted to do was to 'green-up' the site without using expensive soil and avoid loading people with expensive management programmes. The concept of introducing or encouraging biodiversity and self-seeding by discouraging vigorously growing grass came as part of the overall package that Tony delivered.

With our eyes opened we recognised 'odd corners' where pioneer plants were growing reasonably well on the most inhospitable sites.



Brownfield land became an asset because we were able to make more from less. Perhaps we were able to do better than getting just a quart from the pint pot as time went on because nature got involved too once we had given her some encouragement. Nature provided several bonuses. We enjoyed the opportunities to observe

her making her own contribution such as self-sown areas of woodland and the early beginnings of valuable biodiversity. The chance to explain to others what she was doing gave us pleasure too.

The approach adopted was to work with nature to produce low-cost methods of reclamation and rehabilitation. 'Low cost' involved developing an understanding of the character and nature of the material that we were dealing with, for example its chemical and physical characteristics, nutrient status, its water retaining capacity, whether it was free draining or not and how it would react to being graded, rolled and compacted as part of a civil engineering project. This was quite a learning curve for us to move along but because we were open-minded and enthusiastic the lessons were learned very quickly. In truth we didn't recognise that what was happening was that an emerging future for the industry lay ahead of us. We too were pioneers.

Our diagram about the relationship between land use, time, cost and biodiversity went down extremely well in our workshops and international conferences. Our report to the Welsh Development Agency, 'Working with nature', was a best seller and one of my favourite bits of RML's work.

Ivor

OVERBEARING REGULATORS

'Watchdogs need teeth but there are dangers in giving them too big a bite' - Graham Ruddick - The Times, 25 March 2019.

Mr. Ruddick was talking about regulation in the financial world and how regulators made serious misjudgments on an international scale that have cost some countries/people serious amounts of money. Graham was having a go at an EU regulator but was making a general point as well. The headline brought me up short on a Monday morning and set my mind off on having another 'go' at regulations and regulators, one of my recurring moans.

Following on from the ['The big short'](#), - and I enjoyed both the book written by Michael Lewis and Adam McKay's film - then I can understand that the financial world did need regulating but so do many other activities that affect our lives. The environment is one of them and we all know of examples where seriously bad practice has caused problems ranging in scale from a continental impact like the dust bowl in America and the virtual loss of the Aral Sea to a local one like a leaking oil tank attached to a house.

But does Mr. Ruddick have a point? Can regulators be overbearing, overcautious or even obstructionist? Your attitude to regulators will be dependent on your experience of any dealings with them. You may even be part of a team that regulates things such as activities that might disturb areas of special scientific interest or the control/prevention of pollution or landscape management. Whichever 'side of the fence' that you stand on the responsibility to respect nature should be overbearing because as professionals involved in constructing things our livelihoods depend on that respect being diligently applied. But many people, especially those that draw up the regulations, still have a lot to learn about how nature is resourceful and accommodating and this is an approach that we can replicate and apply ourselves.

I have only been on the receiving end of decisions and actions of our regulators and have thought on occasions that both their bark and bite have been unhelpful. This is especially so when our research work, innovative thinking and proposals to extend the range of activities that we can exploit at RML cut across existing regulations. Where does wellbeing fit in I wonder.

Ivor has said quite often that he fears that regulations can be restrictive. Especially restrictive for young scientists encouraged to be innovative and inquisitive about how nature works and are intent on developing new ways of working with her. He has long felt and fretted that today innovation and imagination are incompatible with regulation and regulators and that young professionals will suffer as a consequence. We must be aware that this could happen and where we can we must take steps to avoid it. How does one do that?

Well one can help by creating a culture of appropriate thinking and behaviour. For example a great deal of our concerns and advice about good practice in construction pre-date the arrival of regulation and regulators. If one does create a culture that motivates people to do the right thing, and we try very hard to so do at RML, then we think that our young scientists and science will doubly benefit. Two for the price of one, now where have I heard that recently?

Rules are useful, surely they are, but really they should only exist as a substitute in situations where knowledge, understanding and appropriate motivation are missing.

Idris

'THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST'

The lack of Welsh local planning authorities' resilience: the conclusions of the Auditor General for Wales.

A significant '*business*' item is scheduled for the National Assembly for Wales's Public Accounts Committee on the 16 September 2019 (<http://senedd.assembly.wales/mglIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IId=25600&Opt=0>). This follows the recent findings of the Auditor General for Wales (Wales' independent spending watchdog) in his published report; '*The Effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities in Wales*' i.e. how they are working to implement the Planning (Wales) Act 2015. <https://www.audit.wales/system/files/publications/planning-services-2019-full-report-english.pdf>. A summary Auditor report is available: <https://www.audit.wales/sites/default/files/publications/planning-services-2019-summary-report-english.pdf>

What does this report tell us – anything new or, the same?

The Auditor General '*has concluded that Planning Authorities are not resilient enough to deliver long-term improvements because of their limited capacity and the challenge of managing a complex system.*'

The Royal Town Planning Institute's (R.T.P.I) '*The Planner*' highlights the Auditor General for Wales' response:

"Good planning is essential for more vibrant and sustainable communities, but clear vision is needed in order for Wales to thrive. I am concerned that most local planning authorities have not clearly defined how planning services contribute to the well-being of people and communities."

"My recommendations are designed to help improve capacity and resilience, work towards better engagement with the public, and set a clear, ambitious vision that shows how planning can help to improve well-being"

Some of the Auditor 'findings' are not 'new' as such; but emphasises a determination to move forward. We note the reference '*authorities continue to subsidise services because the charges made by local planning authorities for administering and approving planning applications and building works does not reflect the cost of providing these services.*' This is of clear interest to us here, in the North Wales region. The report highlights that there are opportunities to increase income and reduce subsidisation of planning services:

'Our analysis shows that in 2017-18, real terms income as a proportion of expenditure has significantly increased for development control work and now accounts for 70% of the total cost of these services. However, whilst income is increasing, there is a wide variation in performance. Two local authorities – Isle of

Anglesey and Cardiff – collect more income from development control activity than it costs to provide this service. The remaining 20 authorities are all operating with varying levels of subsidy, ranging from 6.7% to 65.7% of the cost of the service. ‘

The Auditor calculates that, as at ‘the end of 2017-18, the combined deficit on development and building control income to expenditure stood at £11.1 million’

Also, the repeated negative perceptions and “growing disconnect” between citizens and what they want their planning authorities to deliver for their communities are noted; many feel that planners are too focused on individual applications rather than a more sustainable society

Local Planning Authority (LPA) income and expenditure review - North Wales

We can see that, in the published Auditor report tables (copied below), the highest proportion of local planning authority ‘subsidy’ is Denbighshire; the lowest, which also represents the second best ‘ranking’ in Wales, is the Isle of Anglesey:

Appendix 3 – net cost of local authority development control services in 2017-18

Local authority	Expenditure (£'000)	Income (£'000)	Net cost £'000 (negative sum means surplus)	Proportion of subsidy (higher positive % is better)
Isle of Anglesey	767	812	-45	5.9%
Gwynedd	1,097	528	569	-51.9%
Conwy	884	503	381	-43.1%
Denbighshire	952	457	495	-52.0%
Flintshire	1,177	905	273	-23.1%
Wrexham	687	583	104	-15.1%
Powys	1,702	1,372	330	-19.4%
Ceredigion	793	375	418	-52.7%
Pembrokeshire	1,105	648	457	-41.4%
Carmarthenshire	2,272	1,150	1,122	-49.4%
Swansea	2,897	2,370	527	-18.2%
Neath Port Talbot	1,277	438	839	-65.7%
Bridgend	659	464	195	-29.6%
Vale of Glamorgan	1,311	864	447	-34.1%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	1,682	936	746	-44.4%
Merthyr Tydfil	409	263	146	-35.7%
Caerphilly	987	653	334	-33.8%
Blaenau Gwent	683	240	444	-64.9%
Torfaen	629	587	42	-6.7%
Monmouthshire	1,079	430	649	-60.1%
Newport	936	600	336	-35.9%
Cardiff	1,209	2,312	-1,102	91.2%

Source: Revenue outturn (RO) data, StatsWales. Analysis by Wales Audit Office

The way forward for local planning authorities (LPA's) in Wales and the Welsh Government

The report sets out five key recommendations:

1. **Effective engagement:** improving how they involve stakeholders when making decisions and considering choices;
2. **Improve capacity by working collaboratively regionally;**
3. **WG to review development control fees** ‘to ensure the levels set, better reflect the actual costs of providing these services.’ Part of this is due to ‘progress in developing regional responses to strengthen resilience has been slow.
4. **Improve effectiveness of planning committees**
5. Local Planning Authorities to deliver **the ambitions of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.**

Roisin Willmott, director at RTPi Cymru, has noted the importance of the Wales Audit Office report.

Ours and your views?

- Here at RML, part of our annual external auditor’s site inspection means we review cost-effective processes and quality outputs for our tasks, irrespective of the scale of the project.

- Ultimately, Welsh Local Authorities could face *'the survival of the fittest'* but hopefully, not at the expense of significant increases in planning application fees.
- As the saying goes, it's all about the *'tick'* (non- parasitic) in the box, isn't it?..... watch this space.

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