

Consulting branch in a crisis?

Dominik Meier,

President of the German Association of Political Consultants (degepol) writes for *PA Newsletter*...

Public criticism of the consulting branch – would codes of conduct for politics and consulting help? Under this motto the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation in cooperation with the German Association of Political Consultants organised an international symposium on last month in the house of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation in Berlin. The conference attracted more than 150 delegates who came to hear and talk about practical experiences with codes of conduct in other countries and the need for codes of conduct to regulate the interaction between consulting and politics in Germany.



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The positive experiences with codes of conduct in Scotland, England and Brussels, emphasise the clear framework which these codes of conduct have established for parliamentarians, civil servants and lobbyists. Also codes of conduct embody an important instrument of transparency. Codes of conduct cannot prevent black sheep, but they can function as an internal instrument of control. Additionally, they encompass an important signalling function to external society. Besides codes of conduct it is necessary to publish parliamentarians' additional business and their relations to lobbyists in order to preclude a scandalisation of the relations between lobbyists and politicians.

Whereas one part of the conference panellists did not accept any linkage between political office and consulting activity at all, the other part held a disclosure of such relationships was sufficient enough. Concerning the question whether political officials should be temporarily banned from certain professions after ending term in office, the panellists' opinions were likewise divided. Everybody agreed that the combination of an increasing complexity of political decision making processes and a gradually proceeding alienation between the political and the economical worlds increases the demand for external professional consulting. Thus, cooperation between politics, lobbyists and consultants is necessary as well as it is desired – and it must be accompanied by more transparency.

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The changing face of planning and development communications

Andrew Henderson of DLA

Upstream writes from London for *PA Newsletter*...

The strategic management of communications to the end of securing planning permission is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, strategies designed to position applications in the best possible light in the eyes of decision-makers outdate the modern public affairs industry as we know it. For decades, planning officials and elected decision-makers have been lobbied by developers, eager to ensure either that their proposal be approved, or that a rival's be rejected.

Traditionally, developers have either devised and implemented communications strategies themselves, or have extended the brief of their planning consultants to encompass this function. Whilst both approaches have had their successes, they have often lacked a vital element which understands the sensitivities and motivations of the politicians and officials they are seeking to engage with.

Whilst direct applicant and planning consultant-led representation is still commonplace in town halls and council chambers throughout the UK, developers are increasingly recognising the value that public affairs consultants can add in the field, sharing expertise and providing an overview that others may be unable achieve. In turn, the public affairs industry has responded by recognising the potential that planning and development communications offers, and is investing heavily in the sector.

A number of consultancies offer developers a full-service communications advice on planning matters, from town hall monitoring to strategy formulation and local campaigning. Moreover, in addition to espousing the benefits of a client's proposed development at a local level, consultancies are increasingly playing a role further up the planning ladder, helping to involve clients in policy formulation at the regional and national level.

Almost all developers, from housebuilders to retailers or telecommunication mast providers, will have interests that span more than one council jurisdiction, and all will be affected by changes to planning regulations and policy at the national level. Planning and development control issues are riding high on the policy agenda, allowing consultancies to employ traditional public affairs techniques both to brief clients on developments, and to engage them in the policy process.

At present, developers in England and Wales are keenly following the progress of The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill through Parliament. The Bill, which seeks to speed-up the planning process whilst engaging the community in decision-making, is greatly delayed, but contains a number of measures that will impact significantly on the development industry.

Specifically, the possibility of allowing developers to pay a formula-calculated 'planning contribution' as opposed to negotiating planning gain packages with councils is expected to accelerate the process significantly. Other key elements of the Bill include the introduction of 'Statements of Community Involvement' (SCI), an obligation for developers and authorities to increase public input into developments, and a Government response to persistent pressure claiming that the system-currently favours the developer.



Andrew Henderson

North of the border, planning reform is also on the agenda, but the long awaited Scottish Planning Bill has yet to be published. The Scottish Executive is currently considering how to address an increasingly vocal environmental lobby campaigning for Third Party Rights of Appeal on developments. Instead of following the ODPM's SCI model, the Executive has opened the matter to public consultation, the outcome of which remains uncertain, and is leading to mounting concern among developers and the wider business community.

To compound the challenges facing the development industry, the shortage of development space in the UK is becoming increasingly apparent, especially as the need for new housing becomes more acute. The Barker Report claims that up to 120,000 new houses need to be built every year in England and Wales and similarly startling statistics are apportioned to Scotland's already crowded Central Belt. Developers are eager and able to build to meet demand, but often feel that local government's conservative aspirations fail to recognise its role in meeting the national need.

The public affairs industry is well suited to deliver solutions to these challenges. Employing an understanding of politics and policy both locally and nationally, combined with skilful strategy formulation and delivery, consultancies can play a key role in steering individual applications towards successful outcomes, and in ensuring that developers effectively promote their interests in national planning debates.

As the number of consultancies claiming a specialism in the field grows, fuelling competition in the sector, agencies will be driven to develop increasingly innovative solutions for clients, a move that will undoubtedly benefit developers as they continue to navigate their way through an increasingly treacherous political terrain.

Andrew Henderson is a member of DLA Upstream's Planning and Development Communications Team.