

The National Assembly for Wales

Housing Research Summary

A Feasibility Study to Establish a System for Monitoring the Supply and Re-use of Previously Developed Land

The National Assembly for Wales is committed to promoting sustainable development and to reviewing progress towards that goal. The Assembly's Planning Guidance exhorts local authorities to re-use previously developed land for development in preference to greenfield sites since in most cases this will be the more sustainable option, however the extent to which this policy is being implemented at local and national level is currently unknown. For this reason, in December 1999 Hyder Consulting Ltd (with Landmark Information Group) were commissioned to advise on how feasible it would be to set up a Wales-wide system to monitor the supply of previously developed land and what subsequently happens to it. The researchers' main conclusions were that:

- There is widespread support for such a system amongst interested parties and it is technically feasible to set up a system.
- It is essential for such a system to be simple in terms of the data collected, and to be tightly controlled.
- Whether such a system should be set up depends on its costs and who bears them and on its benefits. The researchers concluded that it might cost £100,000 a year to operate a system and that this should be funded by the Assembly. The benefits would lie in providing the means of monitoring the extent to which the Assembly's policies on the re-use of previously developed land were being implemented and the research uncovered a general view that it would stimulate more use of appropriate sites.
- The technology needed for a monitoring system is developing very rapidly. It is likely that hardware and software costs will fall markedly over coming years at the same time as the capabilities of such systems expand.
- A system should be piloted initially perhaps within one of the four voluntary regional strategic planning groupings of local authorities before considering moving to a national system.



About the Study

Aims and Method

The purpose of the project was to advise the Assembly on the feasibility of gathering and updating information on the supply of previously developed land throughout Wales, with details of its current use and characteristics, and in monitoring its subsequent re-use. The study sought to find out whether any existing data sources and reporting mechanisms could be used or adapted for this purpose or what new systems would need to be put into place.

The researchers were asked to then recommend the most efficient and cost-effective approach to monitoring supply and re-use, giving an indication of likely costs. The project was undertaken mainly through detailed consultation with a wide range of interested parties, including local authorities, housebuilders, conservation groups, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Welsh Development Agency and through analysis of similar systems, notably the English National Land Use Database.

Conclusions

One of the primary requirements of a monitoring system would be a firm and consistent definition of previously

developed land. Until a definition is agreed comparable statistics for the whole of Wales will not be possible. The system should also link effectively with other ongoing information technology and land use monitoring initiatives in order to achieve maximum ownership amongst data providers and data users, who would include the National Assembly, local authorities, the Welsh Development Agency and, potentially, a range of commercial and conservation interests. Another key conclusion from the consultation process was that the system should be simple, based on a core of data which will generate a defined set of core outputs (primarily of a statistical nature). This will minimise problems associated with Intellectual Property Rights. A facility to link related specialist data sets to the core should be included, creating a distributed database (where data is not retained within a centralised system, but on a number of different servers managed by the range of data providers). This would provide a far wider possible range of outputs on many specialist subjects. Linking of the data sets would be possible through assigning Unique Reference Numbers to each site.

Three key aspects of the system are how it is funded, who controls it and what data it includes. The research explored the implications of each aspect and various possibilities. Initially at least, the system should be funded centrally by the National Assembly, since only once a complete and consistent system has been established should alternative funding routes be considered. In the longer term it might be possible for the system to be self-financing if it enabled access to commercially valuable information, but otherwise it might cost around £100,000 a year to operate.

The system could be within the custody of one of the data providers, a commercial organisation or an academic institution but the research concluded that whichever option is chosen the National Assembly should appoint the custodian and be responsible for their performance. This would enable swift and decisive decision-making and embody clear direct lines of accountability between the custodian, the data providers and the funder.


The study concluded that to minimise cost and maximise the system's operational

efficiency and utility it is essential that the data collected be as simple as possible.


Clear criteria would need to be laid down governing the form and quality of the data within the core database and in linked sites.

Recommendations

The main recommendation of the study is that any proposed system be tested through a pilot study, perhaps covering one of the four Welsh voluntary regional strategic planning groups. This would provide a robust test of assumptions about budgets, the range of data collected, and different definitions of previously developed land. Such a pilot would also reduce the financial and technical risks of the end project. The pilot would run for up to 12 months and would cost in the region of £30,000-£60,000, depending on its scope. It is also recommended that any full-scale system be internet based and should allow free access to the core dataset by all interested parties. Access to the associated linked data sets could be controlled by a password system.



The report **A Feasibility Study to Establish a System for Monitoring the Supply and Re-use of Previously Developed Land** and this summary can be obtained from the National Assembly for Wales website www.wales.gov.uk or from:



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