

sharing planning research findings with practitioners

Samer Bagaeen, Jo Talbot and Christabel Myers outline the results of a pilot study of an approach to making the outcomes of EU-funded research projects more accessible to spatial planners



Photos: Samer Bagaeen

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How can we share the lessons learnt from places like Eco-Viikki, in Helsinki?

Research suggests there are more than 500 EU-funded co-operation programme projects led by or including UK partners. This is a major source of knowledge and experience which spatial planners could tap into to keep up to date with leading-edge thinking and research. However, spatial planners may well be unaware of the extent of project information that is available.

While projects funded through EU co-operation programmes (such as INTERREG or URBACT) are

obliged to disseminate their findings, such dissemination is largely focused on the main project outcomes, conclusions and recommendations and is usually carried out through the project website. It is unlikely to interpret findings to link them to current and changing spatial planning policy and make them of wider interest to UK spatial planners. Even if planners are aware of particular projects, there is no central UK database of all EU co-operation projects involving UK partners that they

can access, and no easy way of identifying which projects might provide them with useful information, tools, guidance or case studies.

So how could co-operation projects and findings be made more accessible to UK planners, ideally in a low-cost way? To address this question, we undertook a project to:

- test how useful the outcomes from EU co-operation projects could be for UK spatial planners in practice;
- explore whether a template approach could be used to draw out useful findings and analysis on questions linked to spatial planning themes, to give planners – and planning students and academics – a taster of project outcomes and point them to further information or examples of the application of project outcomes; and
- identify how and where project information could be electronically stored for easy access, and how it could be managed and kept up to date.

After an initial assessment, we proposed the use of a project achievement log, produced to a standard 'pro forma' template, to draw out valuable experience from such projects for UK spatial planners (see Fig. 1).

PROJECT LOG: SAMPLE PROJECT

About the project:

Who is it for?

Timing:

Planning issues addressed:

Key messages for planning policy and practice:

Partners:

Further information:
 Project website (link):
 UK contact:

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Fig. 1 Sample project log 'pro forma'

To ensure that the project outcomes and messages were captured and presented clearly and simply, we went through an iterative process of discussion and testing with planners in two local authorities and with the Royal Town Planning Institute. It became clear that key-worded logs on projects funded from various sources would make it easier to find key research and good practice examples by theme and/or country. Most practitioners do not have the time to trawl through individual project

logs themselves, so periodic briefings by theme (or country), drawing on individual logs, would be a valuable, even essential, aid. Self-completion of logs can also reduce costs; but there would be costs associated with web management and reviewing logs for wider dissemination.

Gaining spatial planning knowledge from EU programmes

The starting point for testing the project log proposal was to find a project that could be used to test of the methodology. Working with the University of Brighton Planning School, the INTERREG IVC 'SolidarCity' project (in which the University of Brighton was a partner) was selected to test the template approach to identifying and recording relevant planning messages. The project selection process provided ample evidence that even projects which ostensibly appear to have little to do with planning can yield information that is very pertinent and valuable for planners.

The next step in the project was to test the utility and user-friendliness of the project log pro forma, to:

- find out how useful the outcomes from EU co-operation programme projects could be to practising UK spatial planners; and
- determine whether a template approach of questions and/or analysis linked to spatial planning themes could draw out project findings useful for planners and planning students.

If testing showed the approach could be useful, the aim would then be to test it more widely across other projects, with a view to developing a database of information that spatial planners can tap into.

The SolidarCity project, completed March 2013, was a knowledge exchange project part-funded by the EU INTERREG IVC programme under the 'innovation and the knowledge economy' priority, within the 'employment, human capital and education' sub-theme.¹ It explored how to enhance the role of regional and local authorities and civil society in increasing employment rates and considered how more and better jobs could be created at local level. The project involved partners from six EU Member States – Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Finland, and the UK (the University of Brighton and the Association of Town and City Management).

While the project did not focus specifically on spatial planning, aspects of its work were relevant to spatial planning and to the partnerships that might support spatial planning at the local level. The project focused on what could be done to support people who were inactive in the labour market and help them into employment. Our review of the project, using the project log approach, sought to draw out the spatial implications of the requirements for such support, and the opportunities to provide it.

The initial review was undertaken through a three-part structured process, designed both to draw out any useful knowledge and to test the replicability of the approach to so doing. The three steps are summarised in Fig. 2.

Consultee responses to the project achievement log

The feedback from consultations undertaken as part of the process of assessing the usefulness of the project achievement log approach and the information it gives was considered in two parts – comments on the utility and value of the log as a pro forma, and comments on the value of the information in the log and its usefulness, as outlined in Table 1.

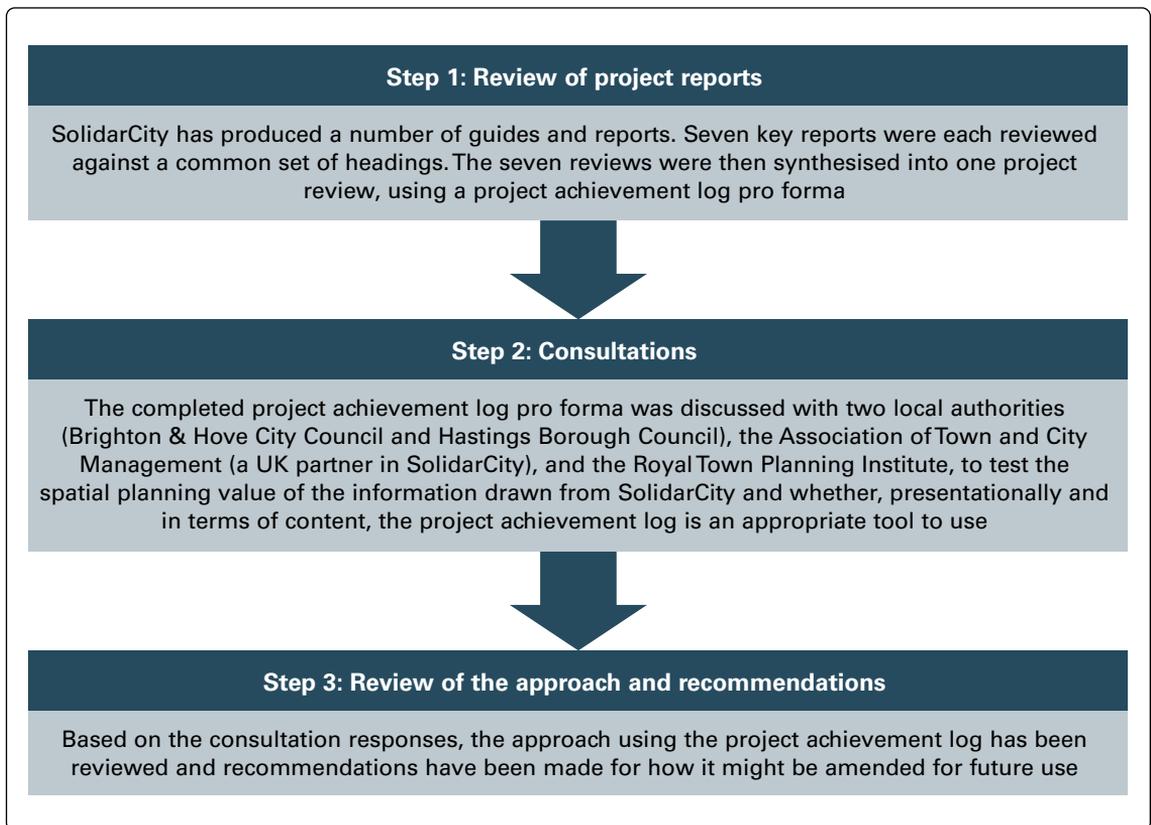
The SolidarCity project partners were keen to communicate the relevance of their research work to spatial planning policy-makers and practitioners. Three valuable lessons for spatial planning policy and practice were drawn out from the project:

- the importance of reflecting the needs of vulnerable employment groups and entrepreneurs in economic planning policies and processes, including plan-making, development management, and stakeholder engagement;

- the need to ensure the vitality of town centres through initiatives such as Business Improvement Districts, to reflect community culture in town centre planning and management, and to encourage representative and active town centre (place-based) partnerships; and
- the importance of helping to build locally driven partnerships which reflect culture, place, and all employment groups (including entrepreneurs and others more likely to find labour market entry difficult).

The main lessons for spatial planning from (and the questions raised by) the SolidarCity project will be the subject of a further article, but the main points raised include the following:

- **Reflect the needs of vulnerable employment groups and entrepreneurs in planning policies and processes:** Economic evidence for plan-making should consider alternative business models (particularly social entrepreneurship) and the implications for business premises and the provision and location of business support services.
- **Ensure the vitality of town centres:** Town centre partnerships can make a key contribution



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Fig. 2 The three steps of the initial review of the project performance log assessment

Table 1

Feedback from consultees on the project achievement log approach

Value of the project log as a pro forma to complete and use

- Generally seems to make sense as a tool for capturing knowledge and distilling it into main points for readers
- Concern that the information is too dense and difficult to get into, although it contains some really interesting discussion around planning messages
- Would benefit from the key messages for planners being up-front – in part to capture interest. Readers could then look at the rest if appropriate
- Messages for development managers in the SolidarCity log are difficult to find. They need to be in the form of clear statements
- Specifically – work with the RTPi to co-ordinate templates for disseminating research findings to practitioners
- There is a question about how to get this type of project log completed – who will do this and with what incentives?

Value of the information in the project log

- Content seems very interesting and relevant for planners; for example challenging approaches to economic growth and where the role of social enterprise might fit
- Valuable to make the links with current/changing planning policy, as this makes findings even more relevant to practitioners
- Case studies look very interesting and useful to practitioners – make more of these
- Provoking thought through questions in the key messages is very valid and useful. However, practical examples and case studies of good practice for use in development management are also sought
- Some of the wording and content is quite specifically for planners – non-planners might struggle with it
- Some of the language is too geared towards Euro-speak and would benefit from simplification into language more geared towards practitioners
- Some of the findings could highlight further policy research questions to pursue; using the NPPF as a means of identifying relevant policy areas seems appropriate

to plan-making and its implementation, for example in relation to the designation, design and use of public spaces. There is also potential for neighbourhood planning to be led by town centre partnerships – although this would raise accountability issues if such a partnership were to be led by business interests, requiring sensitive handling, perhaps through neighbourhood fora involving both businesses and residents. But representation for business interests, particularly local interests, is vital. It could be worth considering whether planning tools such as Local Development Orders and Community Right to Buy initiatives could be used to help implement town centre developments.

- **Develop good governance and partnerships:** Public-private partnerships could help economic aspects of spatial planning by:
 - contributing to local plan-making – particularly on the work/business needs of vulnerable employment groups and entrepreneurs, and on local culture in town centre planning and management activities;
 - acting as consultees on plan-making and applications;

- leading or engaging with neighbourhood planning and related planning activities; and
- engaging in the local use of Community Infrastructure Levy receipts.

Taking the approach forward

In principle, the project achievement log appears to be a valuable means of drawing out useful information for planners, particularly when it makes

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links with current planning issues and changes. However, the SolidarCity project, used to test the project log approach, was not conceived as a

PROJECT LOG: SOLIDARCITY INTERREG IVC PROJECT

About the project: SolidarCity is a knowledge exchange project under the INTERREG IVC priority 'innovation and the knowledge economy' and its 'employment, human capital and education' sub-theme.

Who is it for? SolidarCity is aimed at local and regional authorities and civic society (third sector organisations and communities) who can have an impact on raising employment rates and supporting entrepreneurs, and so help unemployed people to find more and better jobs at the local level.

Timing: Start-finish dates: 2010 - March 2013. Project completed.

Planning issues addressed: The focus of SolidarCity is on sustainable economic development and building a strong, competitive economy. In particular, it considers the role of local authorities and civic society in helping to increase local employment rates.

Key messages for planning policy/practice: The main lessons for spatial planning and questions stimulated by the project are: reflect the needs of vulnerable employment groups and entrepreneurs in planning policies and processes; ensure the vitality of town centres; and develop governance and partnerships.

Key results: The project draws on the experiences of practitioners and other wider studies and has produced seven studies analysing issues around unemployment in vulnerable groups, issues relating to entrepreneurship, examples of how issues around raising employment rates are being addressed, tools which may help, and links to further reading. The studies combine good practice guides, policy recommendations and comparative studies.

Case studies: On many of the common issues identified by project partners, the UK is a contributor of experience to others. Nevertheless, experience in other countries on tackling the issues addressed can be thought-provoking.

Further action: Needed: Further research into social enterprise development; potential planning constraints; accommodation in plan-making; and the impact of development management policies.

Partners:

Lead Partner: Network of European Cities for Sustainable Development, Greece

UK Partners: University of Brighton Planning School and the Association of Town and City Management (ATCM – formerly the Association of Town Centre Management)

Eight other partners in four other countries: Bulgaria, Finland, Italy, and Romania

Further information:

Project website (link): www.solidarcity.eu

UK contact: Samer Bagaeen, University of Brighton Planning School

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Fig. 3 Summary of the SolidarCity project achievement log

planning project, and gleaning its planning messages involved a considerable amount of time spent reading project reports and interpreting their findings into a planning context. This raises questions of how readily this could be done, and by whom, if the approach were to be developed and widely used.

The format of the log as used in consultations had some significant shortcomings. As initially formatted, consultees found it difficult to penetrate the log. In particular, the key messages needed to be more up-front, to make it easy for planners to grasp the main points quickly. The format was thus revised in order to, among other things, put key messages first.

There are doubtless further improvements that could be made and other formats (such as video or audio logs) that could be used.

However, it was difficult to make one log address the needs of two sets of planning stakeholders that might make use of it – planning practitioners involved in development management, and policy planners and academics/students. The two groups are interested in slightly different sets of information, and in some cases in more in-depth information.

Reviewing the SolidarCity project reports, it became apparent that the final conclusions were



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SolidarCity event bringing together practitioners and academics in Palermo in Sicily in October 2012

not always totally clear, and case study detail was sometimes limited. Interpreting this information and giving greater clarity and depth to any planning messages can therefore be problematic. However, as a first pilot to test the use of the project log approach to drawing planning messages from an EU project, the work has been of positive benefit in identifying some very relevant planning messages, which consultees have largely found very interesting and potentially useful. The SolidarCity project achievement log will be made available for wider dissemination.²

Looking to the future, the project log approach to disseminating planning research knowledge to practitioners could be moved forward by:

- **Considering how to distinguish information more relevant to planning practitioners and/or policy planners, as they may be looking for different things:** Our discussions suggest that planning practitioners are looking for concrete information and examples that can be directly applied in a development management context (which might include other UK examples as well as transnational experience). Policy planners are more interested in wider issues around planning topics, the questions they might raise, and how they could be dealt with in policy planning work.
- **Testing the approach on a wider set of projects – exploring in particular the extent to**

which project reports do need to be interpreted into the planning context and whether the extent of effort needed in the SolidarCity pilot is representative: Here, we

are looking for practitioners and researchers to contribute to our endeavour and to assess whether summaries can be read without reference to the original project material. Anyone interested and able to help can read our latest blog on this work³ and is invited to complete the live survey at www.surveymonkey.com/s/Projectlogs

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Notes

- 1 See www.solidarcity.eu
- 2 See the SolidarCity website at www.solidarcity.eu and the RTPi's website at www.rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/research/project-logs/
- 3 See www.rtpi.org.uk/briefing-room/articles-and-opinions/can-european-research-provide-planners-with-useful-planning-messages/