

RTPI NEWS

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Enforcement association has vital role to play in a successful sector

A national enforcement body will help to promote the interests and aims of this crucial profession, argues **Ray Steer-Kemp**

With the forthcoming launch of the National Association for Planning Enforcement (NAPE), I thought that the personal experience and views of an experienced enforcement officer and member of the working group would be helpful to those considering membership.

I am passionate about the current and potential benefits of NAPE and hope that my own experience will ring true with other enforcement officers and reflect their hopes and aspirations. Having retired following 30 years as a police officer, I joined the planning enforcement service 12 years ago. With the benefit of excellent training and mentoring from experienced colleagues, I quickly realised that the skills I acquired in the police force were easily transferable to the enforcement role.

These skills include:

- Dealing and interacting with people at all levels.
- Applying and interpreting the law.
- Conducting interviews and giving evidence in court and at public inquiries.

I was also very fortunate to attend a three-day residential basic enforcement course in my first year of service, which certainly steered me in the right direction. This was followed by another three-day course on advanced enforcement, which was of tremendous benefit. Regrettably, such courses are no longer run to my knowledge, but if there is a need perhaps NAPE can influence their reintroduction.

I was soon introduced to the Federation of South West Enforcement Officers, a group formed in 1989 that attracted enforcement officers from Devon, Cornwall and Somerset. Despite the initial scepticism of some department managers who feared the federation would turn out to be a form of pressure group, it has gone from strength to strength.

The twice-yearly meetings were a



Steer-Kemp: believes that NAPE will lift some of the staff pressure in the sector

valuable opportunity to meet like-minded individuals and the learning process was improved through the shared experiences of the formal speakers and members. I soon volunteered as secretary of the federation, which put me in close contact with officers from other areas. In particular, I formed a close association with Jim Lynn, chairman of the Southern Enforcement Officers Group.

I am conscious of the words of Aldous Huxley who said: "Experience is not what happens to a man, but what a man does with what happens to him." Experience comes with making mistakes and learning from them, as well as learning from those that others have made. This shared learning is the major benefit of belonging to enforcement groups.

The job of an enforcement officer can be a very difficult one with considerable

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pressure due to a lack of sufficient staff, stress and an overwhelming number of complaint-based letters and telephone calls. No matter how many customers are satisfied with our service, we rarely get a letter of thanks.

Like me you are no doubt annoyed by the number of loopholes that the determined unscrupulous developer and contravener seem to find in the planning process, and frustrated by seeing such people get away with breaches without reprimand or other such sanctions. I have had to come to terms with these frustrations and put them to one side in order to function effectively, but in the back of my mind there has always been the thought that enforcement officers will one day have some sway and may even be able to influence changes in legislation where appropriate.

I like the analogy of planning being like a three-legged stool – local plans and policy, development control and effective enforcement. Remove any one and the whole thing collapses. I firmly believe that a professional enforcement service staffed by dedicated officers can perform a vital role within planning and our contribution and professionalism should be recognised.

I was fortunate to be nominated by my

federation to attend a meeting at the RTPI headquarters to discuss the regrettable demise of the Planning Executives Association as a representative body for planning administrators and enforcement. Those officers present volunteered to form a working group to interact closely with the RTPI to examine the possibility of forming a national organisation to represent enforcement.

Many of you will recall the questionnaire sent to enforcement staff in local authorities across the UK. From the encouraging responses we received, the working group prepared a business plan to present to the RTPI executive board. In the past two years the group has received tremendous encouragement and support from all levels within the institute. Without its support the forthcoming launch of NAPE would simply not have been possible.

That is not to say that the journey has been easy. There have been many difficulties to overcome, but thanks to the determination of the working group and the support of the RTPI, NAPE was officially launched this week.

I have no wish to reiterate what has already been said about NAPE in previous articles in *Planning*, but I would like to say that it is my vision and that of my colleagues on the working group that all enforcement staff are represented at a national level. It should also be emphasised that NAPE will act as an umbrella organisation, supporting existing regional enforcement groups and helping to create such groups where none exist.

To make NAPE the success it deserves to be, I implore all local authority enforcement staff to consider joining. Visit <http://nape.rtpi.org.uk> for an online application form or e-mail us at nape@rtpi.org.uk for further information.

Please draw this article to the attention of your enforcement colleagues and welcome to NAPE.

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