

Action planning in Sierra Leone

Clive Harridge, safely rescued from a sinking hovercraft, takes a trip to look at planning in Sierra Leone.

We were travelling by hovercraft from Freetown airport to the Sierra Leone mainland in the middle of the night when the engines failed. We were several miles offshore drifting in total darkness. Eventually a tug came and towed us. As we approached the shore the tug slowed down but we kept going. Then we crashed into the tug with a loud crash, then the hovercraft started to sink slowly, then the engine caught fire, then the tow rope caught in the tug's propeller ... then it was time to abandon 'ship'! Fortunately local fishermen came to rescue us in their narrow canoes just as it was getting light. Unlike two of my colleagues I was fortunate in getting into one which did not capsize. Our arrival in Sierra Leone made banner headlines in the national press 'Hovercraft Sinks' – fortunately no one was injured in the incident.

I was visiting Sierra Leone as part of a local government 'mission' to the city of Bo. Bo has had a friendship link with a number of Warwickshire Councils for over 20 years. There were 5 of us in the group looking at different aspects of local government. I was looking at planning, others covered finance, environmental health, waste management and governance. The visit was funded by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum.

Sierra Leone with a population of about 5 million is one of the poorest countries in the world. Bo is a city about 150 miles from the capital Freetown and a 5 hour drive along mainly a dirt road. Bo has a population of some 160,000 but only intermittent electricity, no mains water supply or mains drainage (most properties have their own wells or use community wells) and very basic waste management.

Following a 10 year civil war which finished in 2002 Sierra Leone established a new democratic political system at national and local levels. At the local level the system is very much as we would recognise with councillors representing local wards, a committee structure, paid staff, financial support from central government and local revenue raised through property taxes and other means. But that is where the similarities end: sometimes central government funding does not arrive (even when it does, it is only very small), most of the council's staff in Bo are illiterate and unskilled in local government, there are problems of corruption and there is a parallel tribal structure with approvals required from tribal chiefs as well as the council.

I was looking at planning in Bo – but in short there is none as we know it! There are only 5 trained planners in the whole country and they work for the government in Freetown. What planning there is in Bo is like our system of building control, but most development takes place in an ad hoc way without any government consent anyway.

The main output from our visit is a three year action plan for which we are now seeking funding from the Commonwealth, World Bank and other aid sources including Water Aid. The action plan focuses on establishing effective waste planning and management, improving financial systems, removing a perpetually burning waste dump in the very heart of the city, improving mains water supply and establishing a community focussed approach to urban planning (building on the excellent community involvement approaches which the city already has). We have also identified Bo Council staff who could benefit from Commonwealth funding training programmes. Whilst in Bo our local government finance expert carried out a series of training exercises with staff which were a great success.

Visiting Sierra Leone and Bo was a tremendous experience and professionally I learnt a lot from having to re-examine fundamental questions like, why do we need planning?

If you are interested in knowing more about the project in Bo or want to get involved in some way (especially if you have skills in waste, planning and water management) please get in touch.

