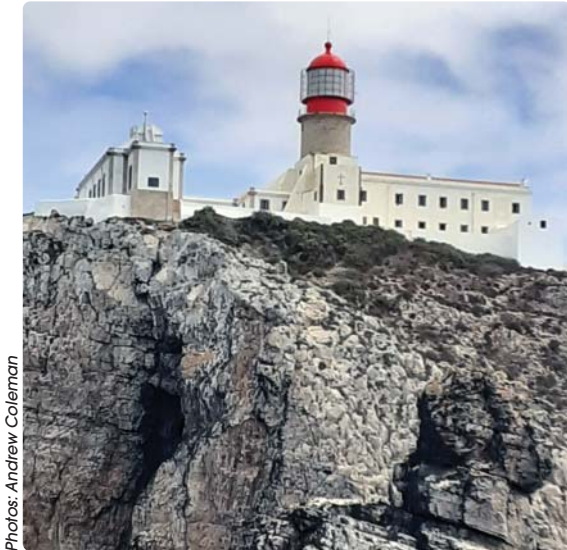


# planning, in a corner

**Andrew Coleman** offers personal reflections on the planning and environmental challenges found in the far south-west of Europe



Photos: Andrew Coleman

**Cabo de San Vicente (left) and Castelejo beach (right) in the south-west tip of Portugal**

Since my first visit in 1986, I have been drawn again and again to the far south-western corner of Portugal—the Western Algarve. The mixture of a wild and beautiful coastline, simple and delicious food, friendly people and consistent surf is a combination that is hard to beat in Europe. Over the years I have seen the physical infrastructure improve—largely because of Portugal’s membership of the EU—and a huge increase in the number of tourists to the far west. Recently, I have started to ponder on how the planning system in Portugal is coping with some of the land use and environmental pressures that it is facing.

## **The place**

The municipality of Lagos is one of 308 in mainland Portugal and contains the principal town of Lagos and the tourist villages to the west, including Praia

da Luz. Even further west are the tourist villages of Salema and Burgau, and slightly inland is the small town of Vila do Bispo (which is the capital of another municipality) and Sagres, with its imposing fortress and lighthouse at the south-west tip of Europe. The area is steeped in the history of the ‘Age of Discovery’—it was from here that the Portuguese explorers of the 14th century and after started exploring the coast of Africa and journeying round the Cape of Good Hope to India, kickstarting Portugal’s era of colonialism that ended after the 1974 revolution swept away decades of right-wing dictatorship.

Lagos is a bustling town of around 25,000 permanent residents, but the remainder of the municipality is largely rural, and a large part of the southern and all of the western coastline is part of the Costa Vicentina National Park, sparsely developed



**Ruin under renovation near Vila do Bispo**



**Vegetation regenerating after a wildfire**

and largely covered by scrub, agriculture, and pockets of forest.

### **The planning system**

Established under its 1976 written constitution, Portugal has national, regional and local plans. The purpose of the planning law includes strengthening national cohesion, correcting regional differences ('levelling up'?), and ensuring equal opportunities. The national plan comprises a national strategy and 'sector' plans on issues such as agriculture, soils, and the coast. The national plan and all the sector plans are heavily influenced by EU Directives which UK planners will recall—such as the SEA Directive, the Habitats Directive, the Floods Directive, etc. Many of these sector policies and special plans are written by national agencies such as the Agência Portuguesa de Ambiental (APA—the Portuguese Environment Agency), which can exercise veto rights over development.

Regional plans<sup>1</sup> go into a little more detail on the overall spatial strategy, but most planning activity takes place at the municipality level. Inter-municipal plans are optional, but other local plans include a strategic municipal masterplan (PDM), which sets out the main constraints, settlement boundaries and strategic policies for the area, an urbanisation plan (PU) setting out development criteria, and a detailed plan (PP) for some specific areas.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, in this far corner of Europe there are few detailed policies for most of the rural settlements. A planning officer in one of the two municipalities told me that it is extremely difficult to get permission for a new home outside the settlement boundary defined in the PDM, unless there is a pre-existing building—or a ruin of one. The national agencies—who are consulted by the municipality when a building permit application is submitted—have a right of veto over development. Within settlement boundaries, it is easier to get permission if the

architect follows local requirements and custom—a friend who renovated a house in the Alentejo region to the north of the Algarve received a visit from the enforcement officer, who told him to change his chimney pot because it was out of character.

### **Climate challenges**

Some of the challenges facing this corner of Europe will be familiar to British rural planners, but climate change is exacerbating some of them to a different level. Portugal has suffered from wildfires for many years, and in 2017 64 people perished in central areas.<sup>3</sup> Wildfires are a common problem. While northern and central parts of Portugal are experiencing rural depopulation, pressures for properties in the south, and the apparent willingness of local authorities to allow the rebuilding of isolated 'ruins', are likely to increase exposure to wildfires. There has also been a reduction in agricultural use in this (a 32% reduction in land in agricultural use in Vila do Bispo between 1974 and 2001) and many other parts of the country, where re-wilding projects are now being implemented.<sup>4</sup>

Water shortages are expected to worsen, with an integrated water strategy to update the National Water Plan<sup>5</sup> currently being devised.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, integration between the EU Water Framework Directive and land use planning remains problematic,<sup>7</sup> so it is likely that development pressures in areas of growth will increase water stress. Portugal's equivalent of the Environment Agency, the APA, produces plans (POCs) for integrated coastal zone management which are meant to promote an adaptive approach and control development within 500 metres of the coast, but they do not seem to translate into planning policies at municipal level, with research concluding that:

*'at the national level, the governance of the coast is too dependent on ill-coordinated interinstitutional relations, while at the local level coastal governance*

*is beholden to the immediate pressures of local economic interests and short electoral cycles.*<sup>8</sup>

A 2017 research paper concluded that 'climate change in planning agendas is still 'little' or 'not important' ... Overall, there is a greater focus on mitigation than adaptation'.<sup>9</sup> In general, it was found that climate change was not a high priority for Portuguese municipalities, and few had dedicated departments or officers. A 2021 paper written by researchers at the University of Aveiro analysed the frequency of water-related terminology in municipal masterplans in upland and estuarine areas in Central Portugal and found that, although later plans had more references to water issues than earlier-adopted plans, there was a lack of consideration of drought and scarcity in all plans. The researchers observed that:

*'Although issues related to scarcity and floods are being dealt with by an increasing number of climate change plans at the local level, they need to be incorporated into the municipal master plans' regulations because it is these that translate them into land-use rules.'*<sup>7</sup>

However, the 2017 survey was completed before a national adaptation plan was revised, and the 2021 University of Aveiro paper related to PDMs adopted pre-2020. A detailed report on the potential for spatial planning to contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation in Lisbon and the surrounding area was published in 2019,<sup>10</sup> and its principles for mitigation and adaptation have been included in a 2020 national good practice guide for municipal plans.

These documents are the equivalent of the TCPA/RTPI guidance for local authorities on planning for climate change and the English national Planning Practice Guidance. If adopted and implemented across the rest of the country, the 2020 good practice guide could increase resilience, and the 2021 University of Aveiro paper<sup>7</sup> offers an analytical methodology that could be adapted to measure the extent to which municipal masterplans include policies to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

My limited analysis of the Vila do Bispo PDM indicates that it does not include any policies aimed at mitigating or adapting to climate change. The much more comprehensive Lagos PDM has been revised to introduce protections to the beaches identified in the recent coastal management plan (POC), and it identifies water features and flood risk zones—but expensive development is nevertheless continuing in these latter areas.<sup>11</sup> The only other climate-specific threat acknowledged is that of desertification, primarily in the rural hinterland.

### **Housing affordability**

A significant and increasing problem in this and other parts of Portugal popular with foreign and domestic tourists and immigrants is the cost of housing.<sup>12</sup> While house prices have been rising by more than 8% per annum,<sup>13</sup> incomes remain relatively low, with a median net income (after income tax is deducted) of between €6,200 and €9,000 in Lagos and Vila do Bispo in 2019.<sup>14</sup>

Developers are not required to provide a proportion of new developments as 'affordable', nor to make a financial contribution for the construction



**New plots at Vila do Bispo**



**Restrictions on wild camping are enforced by the GNR**

of affordable homes. Instead, it is left to the local municipality to acquire land and build homes, and this has become a political issue locally, with parties vying to promise more social housing.

Rent increases have slowed during the Covid-19 pandemic—particularly in areas with a lot of tourist properties—but are likely to accelerate once international tourism accelerates again. Rent increases are linked to market value and have to be agreed between landlord and tenant. Short-term Airbnb-type rental properties have to be registered with the local municipality under the *Alojimento Local* scheme and are subject to licensing. This increases the potential for their numbers to be limited to protect both housing supply and hotels, and to control the impact on amenity,<sup>15</sup> and is similar to the schemes being introduced in Scotland<sup>16</sup> and Wales.<sup>17</sup>

Potential housing shortages for locals are acknowledged in the Lagos PDM, which identifies areas within the city and in surrounding villages as suitable for housing development. The Vila do Bispo PDM also identifies small areas around the town that are suitable for housing, and there are areas within the larger, but less densely developed town of Sagres that are potential development sites.

### **Wild camping and tourism**

While new tourist development is more strictly controlled in the south-west of Portugal than in resorts further east, the wilder west and south coasts have become increasingly popular destinations for motorhome owners and renters. Secluded bays and cliff-top car parks are attractive parking spots for overnight stays, taking in the view, and (often)



**Local election poster in Lagos, promising more social housing**

leaving waste. A local backlash has resulted in a ban on overnight camping outside designated camping grounds, enforced by the GNR (National Guard) and the national park authority through dawn raids and on-the-spot fines.

While some supermarkets provide designated motorhome parking spots, there is a shortage of official campsites, which reportedly get over-busy, thus destroying the reason why many people ‘hit the road’ in the first place. Some municipalities, including Lagos, are now planning to increase capacity for overnight stays, in conjunction with banning these huge boxes on wheels from certain roads that are difficult to navigate.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

While there have been demonstrable improvements in recent decades in the physical infrastructure and the economic wealth in this once-remote part of Portugal, the forces of international capitalism, increased mobility and tourism are combining with the natural forces of climate change to present challenges for planners and municipal authorities which — at the moment — they seem ill-equipped to deal with.

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## Notes

- 1 The Regional Plan for the Algarve — dating from 2007 — can be found at <http://prot.ccdr-alg.pt/> (in Portuguese)
- 2 For a summary of the Portuguese planning system, see the ECTP-CEU webpage at <https://ectp-ceu.eu/members-2/full-members/portugal-apu/>  
The 2008 Vila do Bispo planning documents (and amendments) are available from the Município Vila do Bispo website, at [www.cm-viladobispo.pt/pt/menu/67/planeamento-e-urbanismo.aspx](http://www.cm-viladobispo.pt/pt/menu/67/planeamento-e-urbanismo.aspx) (in Portuguese)  
The 2015 Lagos planning documents (and amendments including revisions to reflect the 2021 coastal management plan (POOC)) are available from the Câmara Municipal de Lagos website, at [www.cm-lagos.pt/areas-de-atuacao/urbanismo/planos-municipais-de-ordenamento-do-territorio](http://www.cm-lagos.pt/areas-de-atuacao/urbanismo/planos-municipais-de-ordenamento-do-territorio) (in Portuguese)  
An online portal is also available for the Lagos planning documents at <https://lagos.city-platform.com/app/?a=epl> (in Portuguese)
- 3 'Wildfires trap 2,000 people in town in central Portugal'. *The Guardian*, 17 Aug. 2017. [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/17/wildfires-trap-2000-people-in-macao-village-in-central-portugal](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/17/wildfires-trap-2000-people-in-macao-village-in-central-portugal)
- 4 See J Dykes: 'The Greater Côa Valley, where nature restoration is reinvigorating Portugal's fire-prone, depopulated interior'. *Geographical*, 13 Sept. 2021. <https://geographical.co.uk/nature/wildlife/item/4142-spotlight-on-the-greater-coa-valley-where-nature-restoration-is-reinvigorating-portugal-s-fire-prone-depopulated-interior>
- 5 'Plano Nacional da Água'. Webpage. Agência Portuguesa de Ambiental (APA). <https://apambiente.pt/agua/plano-nacional-da-agua> (in Portuguese)
- 6 'New Water Bill in debated Parliament'. *The Portugal News*, 19 Sept. 2021. [www.theportugalnews.com/news/2021-09-19/new-water-bill-debated-in-parliament/62467](http://www.theportugalnews.com/news/2021-09-19/new-water-bill-debated-in-parliament/62467)
- 7 C Rodrigues and T Fidelis: 'Distinctive features of spatial planning nearby estuaries — An exploratory analysis of water-related rules in municipal master plans in Portugal'. *Estuarine, Coastal & Shelf Science*, 2021, Vol. 255. 107352. [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272771421002055?via%3Dihub](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272771421002055?via%3Dihub)
- 8 L Schmidt, P Prista, T Saraiva, et al.: 'Adapting governance for coastal change in Portugal'. *Land Use Policy*, 2013, Vol. 31, 314–25
- 9 I Campos, J Guerra, J Ferreira Gomes, et al.: 'Understanding climate change policy and action in Portuguese municipalities: A survey'. *Land Use Policy*, 2017, Vol. 62, 68–78
- 10 See the European Commission/European Environment Agency's Climate ADAPT 'National circumstances relevant to adaptation actions — Portugal' webpage, at <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/countries-regions/countries/portugal> — and, specifically, *O Ordenamento do Território na Resposta às Alterações Climáticas Contributo para os PDM [Spatial Planning in Response to Climate Change: Contribution to PDMs]*. Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional de Lisboa e Vale do Tejo, May, 2019. [www.ccdr-lvt.pt/files/e85da0b52d3e72c3a6aa739bf8b8fc997d87f83c.pdf](http://www.ccdr-lvt.pt/files/e85da0b52d3e72c3a6aa739bf8b8fc997d87f83c.pdf) (in Portuguese); and *PDM GO — Best Practice for Municipal Master Plans*. National Territory Commission, Portugal, Dec. 2020. [www.dgterritorio.gov.pt/PDM-GO-Boas-Praticas-para-os-Planos-Diretores-Municipais?language=en](http://www.dgterritorio.gov.pt/PDM-GO-Boas-Praticas-para-os-Planos-Diretores-Municipais?language=en)
- 11 At the time of writing, three-bedroom apartments in a new development in the floodplain in Lagos are being offered at €1.15 million — see [www.idealhomesportugal.com/property/apartment-in-algarve-idh32276-lagos-79/79](http://www.idealhomesportugal.com/property/apartment-in-algarve-idh32276-lagos-79/79)
- 12 For an account of the particular combination of factors exacerbating the housing crisis in Lisbon, see B Ramalho da Silva 'Luxury Homes, short lets and shacks: inside Lisbon's housing crisis'. *The Guardian*, 22 Dec. 2021. [www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/22/luxury-homes-short-lets-and-shacks-inside-lisbons-housing-crisis](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/22/luxury-homes-short-lets-and-shacks-inside-lisbons-housing-crisis)
- 13 Long-term house purchase and rental prices are above OECD average for 2005–2020 — see Fig. 2.2 in *Brick by Brick: Building Better Housing Policies*. OECD, May 2021. [www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/brick-by-brick\\_b453b043-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/brick-by-brick_b453b043-en)  
The Covid 19 pandemic slowed the rise in house prices slightly — 9.6% in 2019, 8.4% in 2020 (see *Post-Programme Surveillance Report — Portugal, Spring 2021*. European Commission, Jun. 2021. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/post-programme-surveillance-report-portugal-spring-2021\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/post-programme-surveillance-report-portugal-spring-2021_en)), but they have rebounded with a a year-on-year growth rate of 11.6% in the fourth quarter of 2021 (see 'House prices increased 9.4% in 2021 and 11.6% in the 4th quarter of 2021'. Press Release. Statistics Portugal, 23 Mar. 2022. [www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine\\_destaquas&DESTAQUESdest\\_boui=531609492&DESTAQUESstema=5414344&DESTAQUESmodo=2](http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaquas&DESTAQUESdest_boui=531609492&DESTAQUESstema=5414344&DESTAQUESmodo=2))
- 14 *Income Statistics at the Local Level—Reported Income on Personal Income Tax (IRS) Indicators 2019*. Statistics Portugal, Jul. 2021. [www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine\\_destaquas&DESTAQUESdest\\_boui=473160905&DESTAQUESmodo=2](http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaquas&DESTAQUESdest_boui=473160905&DESTAQUESmodo=2))
- 15 See 'Local Lodging'. Webpage. Agency for Administrative Modernization, Portugal. <https://eportugal.gov.pt/en/fichas-de-enquadramento/alojamento-local>
- 16 'Regulating short-term lets'. News Story. Scottish Government, 8 Jan. 2020. [www.gov.scot/news/regulating-short-term-lets/](http://www.gov.scot/news/regulating-short-term-lets/)
- 17 *Planning Legislation and Policy for Second Homes and Short-Term Holiday Lets*. Consultation Document. Welsh Government, Nov. 2021. <https://gov.wales/planning-legislation-and-policy-second-homes-and-short-term-holiday-lets>
- 18 See 'Lagos invests in organizing the practice of motorhomes'. News Story, Lagos City Council, 15 Apr. 2021. [www.cm-lagos.pt/municipio/noticias/8742-lagos-investe-no-ordenamento-da-pratica-do-autocaravanismo](http://www.cm-lagos.pt/municipio/noticias/8742-lagos-investe-no-ordenamento-da-pratica-do-autocaravanismo)