

1. Strategic overview of the planning system

What key principles should underpin the strategic vision of the Scottish planning system? How will the draft NPF3 deliver on these principles?

HOPS agrees with the core values and principles that underpin the planning system as set out in the draft Scottish Planning Policy, para 3.

However, the key principle should be sustainable development in accordance with the Planning Act. The relationship between sustainable economic growth and sustainable development was weak in the first draft SPP though better in the second (October) draft. It is however still unclear how the emphasis to be placed on economic growth is to be reconciled with the legal duty on local planning authorities to comply with sustainable development objectives. Sustainable development has three equal aspects: economic, social and environmental and these three must be properly and evenly balanced. Economic development should not override social and environmental objectives.

One principle that has not been drawn out as well as it might have been relates to the promotion of healthy environments – not just in terms of promoting outdoor access and recreation but as integral parts of the developments that the planning system will support, consent and manage over the coming 10-20 years. In order to provide for the significant changes Scotland needs to make to address health issues, NPF3 should be taken as a real opportunity to ensure that preventative spend is at the forefront of all development proposals – public and private sector.

Draft NPF3 will deliver the principles by:

- Allowing the quality of outcomes of national developments to be judged against those set out in draft SPP
- Creating jobs and prosperity through the promotion of national developments and supporting the framework of Development Plans across Scotland;
- Identifying through the action programme where local authorities and other interests should work together
- Providing public confidence (as the framework is up to date) and has engaged interests early through the Main Issues Report
- Being a very significant material consideration for all planning authorities in terms of the broad aims set out in the spatial strategy.

What are the strategic connections between the National Planning Framework and Scottish Planning Policy? How do they work together to deliver the same priorities?

Broadly speaking, the NPF is the “where” and the SPP is the “how” and this makes sense. The key to them working together is to resolve the sustainable development issue as described above. The fact that both documents have been prepared together is a real benefit and this model should be maintained going forward.

How does the National Planning Framework influence local and regional development plans? How does it influence the development of policy by the Scottish Government and local authorities? How effective is the NPF Action Plan in translating top-level strategy into the planning system?

Planning authorities are expected to prepare plans in the context of the NPF and include national developments. Failure to do this would be addressed at examination and the approval/adoption process. However the relationship between the NPF and Government spending priorities is not as strong as it might have been. The NPF includes spending on projects that have already been decided, e.g. through the Strategic Transport Projects Review and Infrastructure Investment Plan, whereas the NPF should be setting out the spatial vision and driving spending priorities to underpin the delivery of development plans.

The draft Action Programme (January 2014) could be improved by setting out the priority attached to actions, the extent to which it has been implemented and where funding has been committed.

A stronger link to the community planning agenda must be a key aim for the implementation of NPF3 – the role of “place” in promoting healthy environments, building secure neighbourhoods and ensuring public spend in the right places should be a strong element of the action programme.

How does the National Planning Framework link to the National Performance Framework/Scotland Performs? How does the Framework and Scottish Planning Policy support preventative spending and the Christie Commission agenda for the reform of public services in Scotland?

The NPF provides a national context and focus to align the work of the Scottish Government, Key Agencies and Planning Authorities. The table inside the cover of NPF3 captures all of the key links. The focus on outcomes should bring with it a shared understanding on what needs to be delivered to improve and help achieve these outcomes over a long period.

The points raised above in relation to preventative spending are relevant here – strategies for land use planning have a really important role in ensuring that public sector and private sector investment programmes are as well aligned as possible to deliver the kind of preventative spend that can deliver the outcomes we require.

Central to the development and delivery of the planning system envisioned by the NPF and SPP and the definitions of sustainable development and sustainable economic growth. European Union legislation provide an accepted definition of sustainable development as—

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, in other words ensuring that today's growth does not jeopardise the growth possibilities of future generations. Sustainable development thus comprises three elements - economic, social and environmental - which have to be considered in equal measure at the political level". EU sustainable development framework (2001 & 2005): http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/environment/sustainable_development/

This definition forms the basis of the Scottish Government's own definition of sustainable development in the context of its policies. Scottish Government sustainable development under best value advisory note: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/09/19900/42679> However, there does not

appear to be a suitably clear definition of sustainable economic growth. Therefore, how does the Scottish Government define sustainable economic growth in terms of the NPF3 and SPP? How do sustainable economic growth and sustainable development relate to each other in terms of planning policy?

HOPS did raise concerns in relation to this issue in the submission on the draft SPP. Given these concerns, the additional consultation was welcome. There remain, however, unresolved issues – particularly in relation to the implications for development management.

The consultation emphasises that the Development Management process requires applicants to provide good quality and timely information describing the economic, environmental and social implications of the proposal. It also states that this should be proportionate and that ‘planning authorities should avoid asking for additional impact appraisals, unless they are necessary to enable a decision to be made’. This is consistent with the Scottish Government’s overall aim of streamlining planning. But assessing sustainable economic development relative to wider considerations of sustainability and planning implies the need for sufficient information to allow planning authorities to come to a view on how development proposals should be determined. There will be a tension between keeping the assessment burden on applicants proportionate and applications being accompanied by information to allow that assessment to be made.

The term “sustainability” as defined by the Brundtland definition is still far too broad for detailed assessment purposes. Paragraph 7 of the draft states that due weight should be given to net economic benefit but it is unclear as to how this could be effectively determined in relation to specific proposals.

In general the current definition does not provide sufficiently detailed policy guidance to allow an assessment to be made. In terms of suggested development management advice (paragraph 9) there is already a presumption in favour of development underpinning the planning system and so it is unclear what difference the proposed change would make in practice. Looking at performance across the country, for example, we see that over 92% of planning applications were approved in 2011/12.

2. Supporting policy priorities

How will the draft NPF3, and review of SPP support and influence the development of the Scottish Government’s strategies on regeneration and town centre development?

Draft SPP preceded the Town Centre Review but it should be possible to incorporate findings in the finalised version. The Review came out strongly on the “town centre first” principle, yet draft SPP set out a weaker stance by removing the “deficiency” and “cumulative impact criteria” which have been used to limit out-of-centre growth. There is an opportunity now to rectify this.

Both the NPF 3 and SPP therefore have a critical role in supporting the 're-visioning' of our town centres. SPP in particular will need to provide strong policy support for planning authorities in helping town centres adapt to new forms of activity in response to wider economic trends.

Town centres continue to be the most sustainably accessed locations and are at the heart of Scotland's communities. As such they need to remain focal points for economic, leisure and social activity.

It is essential that the SPP reflects the outcomes of the National Review of Town Centres, particularly in terms of promoting a Town Centre First approach to development, supporting residential development and encouraging a mix of cultural, economic and social uses. Equally important is the need to ensure that town centres and regeneration areas benefit from improved connectivity and accessibility.

How is top-level planning policy integrated into the economic and social regeneration strategies by planning authorities in Scotland?

The successful integration of spatial and community planning would be assisted by government spending priorities being driven more explicitly by the NPF. However, it is widely accepted that planning policy needs to continue the process of closer integration with economic and social strategies throughout the public sector. National planning policy must be embraced and understood by Community Planning Partnerships as standard practice. Also, given the obvious link between land use planning and sustainable economic growth, local authorities should be encouraged and supported by the Scottish Government to ensure that the NPF 3 and SPP are both considered as part of economic development strategies.

How will the draft NPF3, and review of SPP support and influence the community planning process? How do these top-level planning policies ensure that community planning partnerships deliver spatial planning under single outcome agreements? In other words, how do SOAs ensure the effective connection between land use planning and community planning?

The requirement for a greater understanding of place as part of SOAs places the planning system in a position to be able to contribute usefully to the process however there remain challenges in being able to demonstrate outcomes, particularly in relation to the contributions policies can make. Much more emphasis of these links in the top level policies will provide a direction and lead to the individual community planning partnerships, and it is suggested that this is an area that could be strengthened further.

The draft SPP is particularly helpful in articulating “how planning makes a difference” towards achieving the national outcomes which directly links to the guidance provided to CPPs when preparing their SOAs.

How are the outcomes of the NPF to be measured? How does the SPP relate to local government benchmarking and best value?

It is assumed that the Action Programme and regular monitoring reports will be used to monitor the delivery of outcomes from NPF. The links from the NPF back to SPP are clear and as such the connections to the outcomes they are intended to contribute to.

For the actions that are to be delivered by Local Authorities, there is a clear framework in place to demonstrate performance through the submission of the annual Planning Performance Framework, and this has allowed a much more rounded demonstration of outcomes on a local authority by local authority basis.

HOPS is working with the Improvement Service and SOLACE to identify indicators which would look to measure the added value that planning contributes. There is an opportunity here to make a clear link to SPP.

How does the Scottish Government incentivise planning authorities to achieve the delivery of the outcomes from the NPF and SPP (e.g. through variations in the planning fee system etc.)?

There has been a significant shift in the focus placed on planning performance by planning authorities. Collaborative working between HOPS and Scottish Government resulted in the requirement for each planning authority to submit an annual Planning Performance Framework. These Frameworks have enabled a much more consistent and qualitative assessment of how planning authorities are helping to deliver outcomes through effective development management and development planning.

A series of key markers of planning performance have been developed by Scottish Government and these are reported on as part of the PPF process. This has helped focus improvement activities across all planning authorities, and provides a clear platform for better benchmarking.

I have touched on the subject of fees in more detail below.

3. The process for development and review of NPF and SPP

How effective has the Government’s consultation process been on the development of the draft NPF3?

Broadly, the consultation process has been effective. It is always a challenge to engage groups in strategic planning, and the emphasis on spatial outcomes in respect of NPF3 was a useful way of capturing input.

The 2006 Act requires the Scottish Government to review the NPF at regular intervals (currently 5 years) and to lay draft revisions of the NPF before the Parliament for consideration. However, no such statutory requirements exist for reviews of the SPP. Should there be an agreed cycle for review of the SPP (statutory or otherwise)? Should this be linked to the cycle for review of the NPF? Should the SPP be subject to a similar level of parliamentary consideration as the NPF?

The principle of reviewing SPP alongside the NPF is supported and it would be logical and consistent for it to similarly require approval of Parliament. This would require a change in legislation. However its status in as a material consideration in a planning decision and the weight that can be attached to it would presumably remain the same.

Is the 60-day statutory timeframe for parliamentary consideration of the draft NPF sufficient to allow for proper scrutiny?

This period appears to be sufficient and proportionate. However, the timing of Committee scrutiny in particular means that any specific further comments from individual councils re

proposed NPF3 key developments/SPP position statement which need to follow democratic decision-making processes may not be obtained in time to contribute to these Committee discussions.

4. The planning process and the work of the committee

During its recent scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s 2014/15 draft budget, the Committee received evidence of a reduction in local government staffing level of over 30,000 in the last five years. As part of this evidence the Committee received anecdotal evidence of a major reduction in the level of resources for the planning system in the financial year 2012/13. Budget submission from the RTPI. In light of this evidence, is the current number of planning officers employed by planning authorities across Scotland adequate?

It is difficult to provide a definitive answer on this question, although the Planning Performance Frameworks and recently established benchmarking groups will allow the situation to be monitored.

For Planning Authorities to be able to maximise their contribution to economic recovery, they must be suitably positioned to respond quickly to an increasing number of planning applications. The reduction in both staffing levels and experience within some planning authorities can also create significant challenges for the production of timely and robust development plans, as required by the Scottish Government.

Land use planning can contribute to the prevention principles that emerged from the Christie Commission through working with colleagues in other Council Departments, the Health sector, Police and a wide range of other agencies. Reducing or static numbers of professional planners limits the opportunities to engage more fully in the Community Planning process.

The ongoing work of HOPS in costing the development management service (referred to below) will also help provide the evidence to answer the question of whether resources are adequate.

In the wake of the recent review, is the current planning fee regime in Scotland sufficient to support the planning system? How does reform of the planning system feature within the Scottish Government’s/COSLA’s plans for delivery of the Christie Commission principles?

The HOPS position is that the current planning fee regime is not sufficient to support the planning system, and that further changes to the fee structure would be appropriate. The 20% increase in fees was a very welcome step in the right direction and there is evidence from across Scotland, gathered by HOPS as to how this increase was used to either maintain levels of staffing or to employ more staff to deal with particular pressures or priorities (for example, dealing with renewable energy projects or enforcement). It is our belief that this investment is leading to improved performance not only in respect of reduced timescales, but also in enabling more co-ordinated action across local authorities to improve services.

The case for increased levels of planning fees has been backed up by the initial findings of a Costings project that was undertaken by fifteen local authorities in 2013. The methodology

was developed by the Planning Advisory Service and CIPFA and is based on three components – time recording, performance information and detailed financial information. The results provide a snapshot of information based on a 4-week time recording period in September/October 2013, combined with financial and performance information from 2012/13, and whilst it may be necessary to fine tune the methodology used or run another cohort of authorities during 2014, the initial findings do appear to demonstrate that planning fees do not cover the full costs of delivering the planning process.

The planning system delivers many of the priorities included in the Christie Commission and is therefore a fundamental component of realising the goal of public services that deliver the best possible outcomes for the communities they serve. Therefore, given the current pressures on public service budgets the possibilities for making the planning system more self-sustaining must be fully explored and implemented in order to achieve the vision set by the Christie Commission.

Performance improvements - whether relating to more effective pre-application advice arrangements or more efficient processing arrangements - have been put in place across the country and now require to be sustained as the numbers of planning applications increase – in Edinburgh for example, numbers of planning applications have increased by over 20% in the last year.

Is the current supply of graduate planners into the Scottish planning system adequate? How many third-level educational institutions currently offer accredited courses in Scotland in terms of urban planning and associated studies?

Three universities offer RTPI fully accredited courses and specialist masters courses – Dundee, Heriot Watt and Glasgow. Whether the number of graduates is adequate is difficult to answer but anecdotal evidence is that the current supply is sufficient albeit that numbers of applicants from outwith Scotland have been high.

Malcolm Macleod
Chairperson, Heads of Planning Scotland 2013/14