

Local Government and Regeneration Committee
Scrutiny of the Draft Third National Planning Framework



RIAS

The Royal Incorporation
of Architects in Scotland

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE MEETING ON 5 FEBRUARY 2014

NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 3 (NPF 3),
REVIEW OF SCOTTISH PLANNING POLICY (SPP)

Evidence From the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS)

With around 4300 members, the RIAS is the professional organisation which represents the interests of Chartered Architects in Scotland. Our members are prime users of the Planning System and over the years have participated fully in the consultation process, and working groups, to evolve the system which is now in place. In recent times the RIAS has participated in the working group on Permitted Development Rights, and the review of the workings of Local Review Bodies. The RIAS is also represented on the, twice-yearly, Stakeholder Meetings at DPEA. Through the work of its Environmental, Housing and Town Planning Committee, the RIAS has sought to develop Mediation and Facilitation techniques for constructive intervention in the Development Plan and Development Management systems.

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?

We are a small nation on the outer fringe of Europe. We have learned to be outward looking, innovative, ambitious and to play to our strengths. Among these strengths are deep rooted self-reliance and a working and cultural environment which keeps Scotland at a level of participation and contention well beyond our size.

The NPF3, through directing the strategic vision of our nation and decision makers to play to our strengths, is fostering a vision which is long established in Scotland, but now has an action plan which is a route map for delivery. The identification of reasoned, strategic objectives for improvement of our social, physical and economic environments will prompt delivery on these principles, tied to a predetermined process for review.

The RIAS would also like to see a greater focus on cities for growth and investment as well as more emphasis on enhancing the sustainability of our fragile rural economies, where depopulation is an ongoing issue. In furthering the objectives of the Committee, the NPF and SPP could promote assistance in rural house building and grant funding to assist rural housing projects.

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

The NPF3 and SPP, taken together, need to be high profile, strategic documents which proclaim clarity, ambition and clear forward intentions. These are needed to provide certainty for all the key public and private sector players; for investors to invest and for developers to direct their time and

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resources. The aims set out in the NPF need to be clear in their purpose and should be capable of delivery within a predetermined timescale driven or guided by the SPP. There should be certainty of applications in the planning process at a local level. Both the SPP and NPF3, taken together, should be a material consideration in the plan making process and in determining applications.

How does the NPF 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?

The NPF should be the starting point for strategic and local development plan review and update. The aims of the NPF should be robust and not lightly set aside by the emergence of local urgencies or opportunism. The NPF and the SPP documents should underpin the Scottish Government's policies for implementation of its stated intentions. The documents should influence and stimulate the nation, through all levels of decision making, to achieve a positive outcome wherever they are applied on the mainland or the island communities. They should guide investment, infrastructure, land use and priorities for implementation. The combined documents should be given this level of importance and relevance. Scotland's local authorities need to have the resources to deliver the plans and the commitment to achieve the outcomes.

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

All the agencies for guidance and regulation of policy and implementation should work together in a harmonised way to bring about beneficial change and development. Outcomes should be predetermined and seen to be achieved in our town, countryside in a well-founded economic and cultural background.

Preventative spend is good housekeeping writ large. Development plans should be supported in the need to address identified priorities or before a greater or less manageable problem arises.

Central to the development and delivery of the planning system envisioned by the NPF and SPP, and the definitions of sustainable development and economic growth. How does the Scottish Government define sustainable economic growth in terms of the NPF3 and SPP? How do sustainable economic growth and economic development relate to each other in terms of planning policy?

Sustainable economic growth could occur at a local level but inhibit economic development which would be more likely to occur at a regional or national level. The SNP3 and the SPP taken together should ensure that, through the guidance and control of development and robust policies, sustainable economic growth arises as a result of and in support of economic development.

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?

Town Centres are more than just spaces, they are a focus of physical, economic, cultural and social activity. Towns, without an identifiable centre, degenerate to being urban tissue without a heart. Planning policies at all levels, from national to local, should foster the wellbeing of town centres. Much has been achieved already through regeneration, enhancement, traffic management and selective pedestrianisation.

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The built heritage needs special care and planning policies and guidance should recognise town centres in that light. Sustainable development is achieved in this context by taking what is there and through a process of skilled conservation, adaptation and regeneration, produce town centres fit for purpose, today and tomorrow. The terms of NPF3 and SPP taken together should work in parallel to support that aim.

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

It will be integrated through compliance with Government Policy and adoption of the economic and social strategies for regeneration. These strategies should be built into strategic and local development plans and the allocation of funds aligned to the implementation of regeneration initiatives.

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 new NPF3 will be seen as the primary guidance for the preparation and adjustment of Strategic and Local Development Plans and the SPP will be the machinery for bringing it about. The planning policies will provide the guidance and justification. It is important that there are specific, rather than general, targets for action, with time scales for implementation. Processing Agreements will be a useful implement to establish intentions and provide firm expectations for those who are providing investment and rely on predicted results.

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

Regular performance indicators and review of statistics should allow performance and stages of achievement to be measured against the preset expectations and guidance provided by the NPF3 and the 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)?

Planning authorities need to work within a culture where the focus is not the process, but the enthusiastic encouragement of an outcome which is beneficial to all concerned, within a reasonable time scale. In representing the view of RIAS members, we find that there can be much negativity and unreasonable restraint in processing applications.

Planning officers should feel that they have the opportunity to be part of a positive, productive process which bestows credit and praise on the planning department. Training in design would enable officers to make a more positive contribution to the dialogue with architects in fostering good design. There has to be some empowerment given to officers to avoid the waste of time in developing a scheme in a constructive dialogue, without the risk of some more senior officer setting all the work aside to recommend refusal.

The process of Local Review Bodies is inconsistent. In some cases it does little to enhance the appreciation of the working of planning authorities, with high levels of frustration arising from planning officers having to preside over a system with evident failings, with practitioners and

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agents feeling let down. Properly regulated and managed however Local Review Bodies can make a positive contribution. Further consultation, across the relevant professions is required. The chances of success in appeal with LRB procedures is less than 30% against the process by qualified and experienced Reporters at DPEA. This form of dispute resolution does little for the esteem of the planning authority or for those who have committed time and resources to a reasonable outcome.

With regard to the incentivising the planning authority, the setting of fees at a variable rate may produce a more effective planning process and lead to a happier relationship between planners and applicants. At a Government working group looking at the level of submission fees, there was clear support for increasing fees this was more likely to produce a positive consent within a reasonable time scale.

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.

The process of engagement started with the earlier versions of the NPF and the awareness that there was such a document. The architectural profession is normally a key respondent to consultations, and for those within the profession who come in touch with strategic policy documents, there was an awareness of the new, emerging NPF3. There appears to have been limited input from practitioners, many of whom would have made valuable comment. A longer period of consultation would have been helpful.

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 requirement exists for reviews of the SPP. Should there be an agreed cycle of 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?

There would be merit in both documents being updated and formally reviewed in parallel. There should, in any event be a regular review of both documents to allow for emerging and unexpected changes in economic or operating conditions. Any changes could be consolidated in new, revised documents at the end of the 5 year period.

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

Three months would give more time for organisations to gather information and frame opinion.

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 major reduction in local government staffing levels 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. In light of this evidence, is the current number of planning officers employed by planning authorities across Scotland, adequate?

We do not have the statistical information to produce a fully evidenced reasoned response to this question. Through the experience of RIAS members, who have been using the planning system

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over the past few years, there is a view that the system has been coping with the recent, reduced levels of activity but is probably inadequately resourced to meet the demands of an upturn in economic activity.

With regard to the current planning fee regime, we do not have the information to form a view on the resourcing of the planning system or the number of training courses required to maintain an adequate level of qualified planners. There is concerns however that the planning process would be much improved if a greater proportion of officers had even rudimentary design training.

Note: the above responses were prepared by the RIAS, Environmental Housing and Town Planning Committee and carry the formal approval of the RIAS President.