

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 4 THINK PIECE – BLOG – COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

The Scottish Government is keen to bring together views and ideas from a wide range of sectors and to explore the priorities Scotland's fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4) should address.

In the third in a series of Think Pieces Fiona Garven, the Director of the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC), sets out her thoughts on Scotland2050 and specifically community development. The opinions expressed are that of the author and we hope that they will stimulate debate and discussion.

Think Piece

In Scotland, we speak the language of 'community empowerment'. The term is now deeply embedded in Scotland's narrative and prominent in recent policy initiatives.

In the last decade, the benefits of independent community-led action have increasingly been recognised as a way to relieve pressure on public services and contribute to inclusive economic growth. Across Scotland we see community organisations coming together to help change things for the better, in their local areas, or for the people they work to support. Spanning issues such as housing, fuel poverty, isolation and mental health, the environment and access to good community facilities, community organisations have been able to develop new projects, lever in funds and provide essential local services.

People care deeply about their place - how it looks, how it feels to live there, what opportunities it provides for work and interaction with others, and how it connects to other places. In Scotland many communities are coming together to develop their own action plans designed to improve services and help make their communities more vibrant, sustainable and good places to be.

Place is often at the heart of many community led action plans but engagement with the current planning system in Scotland can be a frustrating process – people don't understand how it works, on what basis planning decisions are made, and there is often a belief that planning decisions favour development above community needs and aspirations. There are limited opportunities for dialogue between communities and the planning system to help ensure that it cares for and protects our people and our environment and, at the same time, provides good quality housing and builds the necessary infrastructure for Scotland to thrive economically.

New legislation means that communities can take ownership of land and buildings and they can get involved in how some of the decisions that affect them are made. In community empowerment terms this is progress, but our policy ambitions will not be realised unless more power is devolved to a local level.

New developments in the Planning (Scotland) Act on local place plans (LPPs) are welcome, but they don't go far enough. If LPPs are to succeed in their aspiration to be a mechanism for community empowerment in the planning system, they should be community initiated and community led – they should not be invited, they should be pro-actively supported and nourished from the ground up and the planning system, and other public agencies should be required to respond in an holistic and coherent way. But, not all communities are starting from the same place. Deep inequalities still exist in Scotland - we need to drive professional advice and resources into those areas currently experiencing the impacts of structural inequalities to support them to act and to 'give them a place at the table'.

What does all this mean for NPF4?

NPF4 should not only act as a national spatial plan. NPF4 could provide an overarching set of national planning principles which embody the established government priorities of community empowerment and tackling inequalities. Those principles can then guide how, and on what basis, planning decisions are made.

In the short term, if we do not invest in supporting communities as equal partners we will not fully appreciate or utilise our best assets. Hostility and distrust will prevail as communities feel 'done to' and powerless in influencing and contributing to decisions that affect them in their everyday lives, in the places they live and work and interact. Communities who are marginalised will continue to be 'seldom heard' and inequalities will persist.

In the longer term, if we start to trust communities better, support them as equal partners and offer them a stake in our future, we can collectively and collaboratively work through a process of change to make Scotland the best place it can be, for us and for generations to come.

Biography

Fiona Garven is Director of the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC), which hosts the Community Health Exchange (CHEX), the Scottish Co-Production Network and Participatory Budgeting Scotland. Her main areas of interest are community-led approaches to health and wellbeing, community empowerment and democratic participation. She is a Non-Executive Director of the Poverty Alliance and North Ayrshire Women's Aid.