

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 4 THINK PIECE – BLOG – SCOTLAND'S ENVIRONMENT

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 seventh in a series of Think Pieces, Aedán Smith, the Convenor of Scottish Environment Link's Planning Group, sets out his thoughts on Scotland2050 and specifically Scotland's environment. The opinions expressed are that of the author and we hope that they will stimulate debate and discussion.

The issues and opportunities

Environmental challenges are more urgent and high profile than ever before. Tackling them must be the overarching purpose of NPF4.

As the scientific evidence grows ever stronger, society may finally be awakening to the possibility of impending environmental catastrophe. Many in Scotland have taken to the streets for the first time in their lives this year to join the youth climate strikers and Extinction Rebellion. In April the First Minister declared a climate emergency and in September the Scottish Parliament responded with a new Climate Bill. This confirmed new targets of "net-zero" emissions by 2045 and a 75% reduction by 2030. And it's increasingly clear that a similar effort is needed to restore nature. The UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) highlighted in May¹ how global nature was declining at "rates unprecedented in human history" and that "transformative changes" were needed. Additionally, the 2019 State of Nature reports showed that on average, we are still losing wildlife in terms of both species' abundance and occupied range across Scotland². In order to instigate the transformative changes required to turn things around before 2050, there will need to be some transformative changes to policy in NPF4.

The scale of the challenge is daunting, but there are reasons to be positive. In particular, it is increasingly clear that many of the most effective solutions to climate change also involve the restoration of nature. Protecting and repairing peatlands, reinstating native forests and recreating coastal habitats contribute multiple benefits for climate, nature, economy and society. On a local scale, integrating high quality greenspace with native species planting into new developments can provide habitat for species under pressure from climate change and habitat loss and help mitigate the effects of climate change on the development itself.

The fact that we already have a national spatial strategy in the form of the National Planning Framework also gives cause for optimism. An emergency requires an

¹ <https://www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment>

² <https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019/reports/>

emergency plan, and NPF4 will, effectively, be that emergency plan for the built environment.

Planning solutions

Perhaps the biggest change for NPF4 and for the planning system will be culture change in the way the planning system considers the environmental impacts of development. The current system has evolved to reduce, minimise and mitigate impacts, reflecting the fact that most development leaves the environment worse off to some extent. The planning system serves to reduce this damage to a perceived acceptable level, in the wider public interest. But to tackle the emergency, reducing environmental damage alone is not nearly enough. From now on almost every development must actively reduce carbon emissions and restore biodiversity. In order to ensure this happens, NPF4 will need to set out clear criteria not only on embedded energy use and generation, but also full lifecycle carbon emissions, including transport. For example, it's hard to envisage current commuting patterns continuing. There will also need to be a clear mitigation hierarchy approach to biodiversity impacts, using a national ecological network to help identify restoration opportunities and ensure there is a genuine net gain for biodiversity from all development.

NPF4 will also require a new, more integrated approach to policy development and regulation – something planning is well placed to take a leading role in. NPF3 already went some way to providing an integrated approach for the built environment. However, to date, Ministers have considered their Economic Strategy as supreme. NPF3 was described by Ministers as “the spatial expression of the Government Economic Strategy”. For NPF4 we will need a new hierarchy, which puts improving the environment and society first, setting an ambitious, optimistic and coordinated vision for the better, sustainable, Scotland we need in 2050. It must set a route map that economic strategy can follow, adjusting the economic levers to help us get there.

The next 30 years will be among the most challenging Scotland has ever faced. Tackling climate change and biodiversity loss will require significant effort across the whole country and far beyond, but NPF4 can, and must, provide the coordination and leadership required

Summary

*Short term (next 10 years) – what **will** happen?*

Continued increase in public pressure for governments and others to take transformative action on the environmental emergency resulting in improved policies and actions but slower than required necessitating significant ramping up of effort and additional costs later in the next decade. Hopefully, though, NPF4 will provide an appropriate emergency response.

*Long term – what **could** happen?*

Unfortunately, unless the measures highlighted here (and much more in other sectors) happen, we will see continued loss of nature, including national and local extinctions of species in Scotland, and little hope of success for global efforts to halt

catastrophic climate change – but I am optimistic the necessary transformative change will happen!

*Overall – what **should** happen?*

Immediate emergency requirement for almost all new developments to have net zero greenhouse gas emissions, or be emissions reducing, and deliver net benefits for biodiversity – the science is clear that we really can't wait for NPF4 to be published.

Biography

Aedán Smith is a Chartered Town Planner. He is Head of Policy for RSPB Scotland and, for over 10 years, was RSPB Scotland Head of Planning. He is a Board member of Stop Climate Chaos Scotland. He has also worked in environmental planning consultancy and development management and planning policy for a local planning authority.