

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 4 THINK PIECE – BLOG – NATURE ON A NATIONAL SCALE

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 eleventh in a series of Think Pieces, Diarmid Hearn, Head of Public Policy at the National Trust for Scotland, sets out his thoughts on Scotland2050 and specifically on nature on a national scale. The opinions expressed are that of the author and we hope that they will stimulate debate and discussion.

The issues and opportunities:

Scotland is a patchwork of large and small plots of land, under many different ownerships, and put to a variety of land uses. This lends our country much of its character and interest, as well as providing for our social and economic needs. Within this, our planning system is how we find resolutions for competing or conflicting needs.

What we are less good at – perhaps because it has no voice of its own – is planning for nature. Our current approach is piecemeal, predominately local, in the form of nature reserves or Sites of Special Scientific Interest, for example, and occasionally rising to regional-scale, in the form of National Scenic Areas or National Parks – but not to a national scale. Our natural environment, its species and habitats needs connectivity to function well, which can only be achieved by taking a truly national perspective. This is recognised by the Scottish Government in its declaration of a climate emergency, and in the latest Programme for Government where the government identifies that “nature plays a key role in defining and regulating our climate and climate is key in shaping the state of nature.”

Planning solutions:

The planning system has the power to prevent and to encourage, but not to dictate. We believe the planning system currently has unrealised potential to frame expectations for a healthier, attractive and more resilient country, resulting in benefits for all.

The National Trust for Scotland is one of the largest landowners in Scotland managing land for public access, enjoyment, biodiversity and landscape. Our estate encompasses large areas of upland, coasts, islands and lowlands. As such we are well placed to understand the challenges of managing for multiple public benefits. A common thread across our properties is the need to consider and work with neighbouring landowners, especially where designated site boundaries cross ownership boundaries. Many of the systemic pressures (e.g. invasive non-native species, grazing pressure) and solutions emanate from the wider landscape. Landscape-scale partnerships are a potential solution at a local level, but they are

piecemeal and often exist within a policy vacuum. The best examples are where they operate within a broader planning framework such as a National Park.

Within a Scotland-wide context, a National Ecological Network, embedded within the planning system would be a major step forward in enabling landowners to address some of the key drivers of biodiversity loss. Collaboration also brings other benefits such as social cohesion and economic efficiencies. Our vision for an NEN would also seek to integrate landscape and biodiversity objectives. Existing protected areas would form the backbone of a wider landscape network, where existing areas of natural habitat are enhanced, new areas of habitat are restored and created, and land managed for other purposes is managed in a way that supports nature. The NEN would take a strategic approach to where and how to target habitat conservation and creation and how to shape land use policy in a way that contributes most effectively to shared goals. We believe this could be by shaping future development, rather than dictating and – as the long-term health of our planet becomes more visible and important – is likely to command widespread public support.

Summary:

Short term (next 10 years) – the National Planning Framework 4 puts the National Ecological Network on a sound footing, and greater connectivity for Scotland's species and habitats is realised.

Long term – Scotland's green network flourishes alongside other essential networks, such as transport, energy or communications.

Overall – Scotland plans for its green infrastructure in the same way as it currently plans for its "grey" infrastructure (transport, communications, energy) resulting in a healthier, more resilient, and better performing country.

Author Biography

Diarmid Hearn is Head of Public Policy at the National Trust for Scotland, engaging with public policy and legislation as it affects the conservation and enjoyment of our national heritage. Reform of the planning system has been a recent focus of effort, including original research on citizens' preferences.