

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 4 THINK PIECE – BLOG – AN ACCESSIBLE SCOTLAND

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 thirty-second in a series of Think Pieces, Professor Iain Docherty, Dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies and Professor of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Stirling sets out his thoughts on Scotland2050 and specifically on an accessible Scotland. The opinions expressed are that of the author and we hope that they will stimulate debate and discussion.

The issues and opportunities

The devolved era has seen unprecedented investment in connections between Scotland's cities. Major projects such as the Queensferry Crossing, central belt rail electrification and the dualling of the A9 are tangible evidence of successive governments' commitment to making it easier to move around Scotland, and to support major centres of economic and social life.

But we also know that over time, people have tended to use the possibilities afforded by new transport infrastructure to travel further to do the same things. So whilst improvements to roads and railways gives some people more choice over where to live and where to work, the overall contribution of the investments we have made in improving connectivity is perhaps not as great as we assume or would like it to be. At the same time, the level of accessibility to jobs, education and healthcare in some communities remains poor, and is declining further. Although it is easier to move *between* our cities than ever before, it is harder to move *within* them due to congestion and patchy service quality. And what use is a concessionary pass if you live in a rural area no longer served by any buses at all?

The Scottish Government's commitment to delivering a net zero carbon economy by 2045 provides a systemic challenge to the way we have conceptualised accessibility until now. We know from research that even if we move to a completely electric vehicle fleet, achieving net zero will mean that we will need to travel less than we currently do. Public transport will need to accommodate a much larger proportion of journeys. Rhetoric about more attractive places will need to become reality, so that walking and cycling grow to the level required. This starts with simple things like investing in the public realm. In other words, we will need to stop spending money to make it possible for *some* people to travel further to do the same things, and instead invest in those interventions that make it possible for *everybody* to access what they need in a sustainable way. After all, this is what inclusive growth, another Scottish Government core objective – means in practice.

The planning system will therefore need to address some tough questions. Given we will need to travel less, our current assumptions about where development should

take place will need to be revised. Further, we will need to come to terms with the fact that what people *want* in terms of housing, transport and so on is neither what they *need*, nor what we can actually *afford* in terms of carbon. To me at least, this suggests that the planning system will need to become more interventionist and directive in terms of what happens where, not least because we will need to make better use of existing infrastructure to achieve decarbonisation in the timescales required.

Summary:

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

Existing trends, from travelling further to do the same things to buying bigger and bigger vehicles and the continuing decline of bus services in many parts of Scotland are unsustainable and completely at odds with our stated objectives for net zero carbon and inclusive growth. It is highly unlikely that market mechanisms will alter these trends in the timescales required.

*Long term – what **could** happen?*

Either we are serious about net zero carbon or we're not. If we're serious, we need real action to reduce the amount of travel required in the economy which means a fundamental reappraisal of where economic and social activity occurs so it is accessible, and how we move between and within these places. On current trends, transport will become the main reason why we will fail to meet our carbon objectives and therefore fail to arrest climate change.

*Overall – what **should** happen?*

We need to travel less overall. The proportion of travel undertaken by car needs to reduce significantly, and fast. We need much better equality in terms of how easy it is to access and employment and key public services at individual and community level. This will require a very different approach to planning than we have pursued recently.

Author Biography

Iain Docherty is Dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies and Professor of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Stirling. He has researched the links between transport, strategic planning and economic development for over 20 years, and is currently a Commissioner with the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland.