

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 4 THINK PIECE - SCOTLAND 2050: VACANT AND DERELICT LAND

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-third in a series of Think Pieces Anne Johnstone, Partner and Head of ESG at Hollis, sets out her thoughts on Scotland2050 and specifically on Vacant and Derelict Land. The opinions expressed are that of the author and we hope that they will stimulate debate and discussion.

The issues and opportunities:

Scotland currently has around 11,600 hectares of vacant and derelict land, spread across 3,700 sites. Since the Vacant and Derelict Land Register was created 30 years ago, many sites have been brought back into productive use, but the total area has barely changed and many sites, particularly small sites in areas of multiple deprivation, have remained untouched. These sites have a disproportionate impact on the communities around them, so we must find ways of bringing them back into use.

Many of these sites exist as the legacy of Scotland's industrial past, but by no means all of them. It is important, looking ahead to 2050, that as well as dealing with existing sites we create a culture change that embeds the expectation across all sectors that sites must be re-used. We have to future-proof development against the risk of new sites becoming vacant and derelict and this is where the planning system will play a key role.

A key question about the future of these sites is what is "productive" use? The planning purpose outlined in NPF4 to "manage the development and use of land in the long term public interest" clearly points to the need for sustainable development and the importance of considering the social and environmental benefits of development, as well as the economic ones. Vacant and derelict land has an important role to play in meeting greenhouse gas reduction targets (for example by creation of urban woodlands) and providing community benefits that deliver social value. For this to happen effectively, local consultation will be key, but it must take place within a wider strategy that provides stability and transparency to investors, allowing them to create new financial instruments designed to unlock regeneration. Rather than re-invent the wheel, it would make sense for the planning system to adapt to accommodate these requirements.

The majority of vacant and derelict sites are located in the Central Belt, particularly in Glasgow and there is undoubtedly a strong correlation between vacant and derelict sites and former industrial areas. However, it is not purely an urban problem and arguably vacant and derelict sites in more remote areas are even more problematic. Expanding the range of factors that are considered in terms of causes of harm (e.g. health, community impact, biodiversity loss and economic) and therefore the benefits that can be delivered by mitigating these factors may change the balance in terms of cost-benefit analysis that is currently preventing such sites from being redeveloped.

Planning solutions:

The planning system has the most direct policy impact on regeneration. In particular, the issue of land reform and the use of Compulsory Sales Orders. NPF4 can support the delivery of high profile “demonstrator” sites that provide “proof-of-concept” for other vacant and derelict sites, and also the development of practical decision-making tools for communities and others to use.

NPF4 could also encourage the creation of development planning areas, which should be linked to City Deals, and secure the engagement of large economic actors such as the NHS, Scotland’s universities and financial institutions in delivering benefits to the communities local to their operations.

Summary:

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

*Long term – what **could** happen?*

*Overall – what **should** happen?*

In summary:

- The area of vacant and derelict land in Scotland will be cut by at least half, bringing over 5,000 hectares of land back into productive use.
- We succeed in changing perception of vacant and derelict land to seeing the opportunity to deliver social and environmental benefits, including creating stronger local communities and creating a net zero carbon economy.
- We create a socially responsible corporate culture that makes it unacceptable for sites to become abandoned in the first place, making the very concept of vacant and derelict land a redundant one.

Biography

Anne Johnstone is a Partner and Head of ESG at Hollis, an international, independent real estate consultancy. Anne is a member of the Scottish Vacant and Derelict Land Taskforce, the Investment Property Forum Scottish board and is Past Chair of the UK Environmental Law Association.