

National Planning Framework 4

Call for Ideas – “What Scotland will be like in 2050?”

Introduction

I wish to restrict my response to the Call for Ideas to **the need for NPF4 and its associated Scottish Planning Policy to contain an explicit national planning policy for the development of new huts for informal recreation**. Such huts were defined in the 2014 Scottish Planning Policy, which also included, under “Promoting Rural Development”, the requirement that Planning Authorities’ Development “Plans should set out a spatial strategy that” where appropriate, sets out policies and proposals for leisure accommodation, such as holiday units, caravans, and huts”. Follow-up legislation was also subsequently passed setting out how the building standards would apply to huts constructed under this planning provision.

The Issue Requiring to be Addressed by NPF4

It has become apparent since 2014 that **NPF3 and its Scottish Planning Strategy does not provide sufficient direction to Planning Authorities to ensure a) that huts are indeed covered by Local Plans, and b) the presumption in favour of hut development unless policy indicates otherwise**. The lack of an associated detailed Planning Advice Note for huts appears also to have been an issue, as there are historic PANs for other developments such as “housing in the countryside”, “farm and forestry buildings”, and rural diversification”. Consequently, the approval of hut developments is extremely varied across the country, with some Planning Authorities only approving them when the development accords with criteria for other, inappropriate, classes of development.

I will use one Planning Authority as an example of the issue NPF4 needs to address. Perth and Kinross Council’s very recent Local Plan (November 2019) makes no mention at all of huts in any of its c.31 Planning Policies, far less “setting out a spatial strategy” for them as required by the Scottish Planning Policy. Although the 2014 SPP states that “*this SPP and the presumption in favour of development that contributes to sustainable development will be material considerations*” for proposals that do not accord with up-to-date development plans, there is no evidence of any such presumption in favour of development. In fact it appears that, in the absence of hut-specific planning guidance, planning officials are referring to inappropriate criteria/guidance for entirely different classes of development, such as rural housing or commercial tourism ventures.

Huts and Hutting within NPF4

One of the questions in the Call for Ideas is “*How can planning best support our quality of life, health & wellbeing in the future?*”, and two of the stated high level outcomes of NPF4 are “*Improving the health and well-being of people living in Scotland*” and “*Improving equality and eliminating discrimination*”.

It is my belief that the promotion and facilitation of hut developments by the planning system will contribute to all of these aims, and that planning for huts was in fact inappropriately positioned within NPF3 as a “rural development” issue. **Hutting is primarily about improving the quality of life, and the physical and mental health - of both urban and rural Scots**. It is well established that having somewhere away from home and work to take occasional peaceful informal recreation carries real quality of life and health (esp mental) benefits- which is why it is mainstream in Scandinavia.

I would also argue that hutting will make a contribution to improving equality and reducing discrimination through making the enjoyment/ benefits of Scotland’s countryside more accessible to less well-off Scots from urban areas. Making NPF4 more explicit on promoting the creation of more huts for occasional informal recreation, therefore, effectively builds on the public access provisions of the 2003 Land Reform Act.

Although far from being the primary purpose of hutting, a planning system that enables more huts will undoubtedly have rural development benefits as hutters will buy provisions locally and may eat/drink out and visit local attractions - and the construction of huts may even free up some holiday cottages for residential use.

Recommendation

NPF4's Scottish Planning Strategy must be much more explicit than its predecessor in its promotion of appropriate hut developments on their own merits (i.e. without the need to justify on other grounds such as rural housing, rural development, tourism enterprises etc). It should also **be very clear that this national planning policy (which contains its own safeguards) takes precedence over the content of Local Authority plans**. Furthermore, as affordability is key to the principle of hutting, Planning Authorities must not be allowed the scope to insist on the use of costly materials or designs, and not should be permitted to charge council tax or non-domestic rates on huts, which are only for occasional informal recreational use, and generally off-grid in terms of services.

The definition of a hut in terms of planning is already tight, as is the subsequent associated building standards legislation. There is also a great deal of further detailed guidance for planning applicants in materials published by Reforesting Scotland's Thousand Huts campaign. So what is required now is for **NPF4 and its Scottish Planning Policy to be explicit in promoting the opportunities for appropriate hut developments (single or multiple) across rural Scotland on their own merits, and irrespective of the content of Local Development Plans**.