

NPF4 RTPI Scotland Chapter Workshops – Dumfries and Galloway

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What could the atomisation of our society look like?

Early engagement to seek views on the scope and content of NPF4 was being carried out from January to March 2020, as part of the Scottish Government's work with the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) to make sure that the planning profession has its say on NPF4.

The RTPI Scotland Dumfries and Galloway Chapter workshop was held on 24 February 2020 at The Stove, Dumfries. The event gave local members the opportunity to voice their suggestions in a workshop setting and to discuss the issues and challenges in taking these ideas forward.

As with workshops held all over Scotland, participants took part in facilitated small group discussions to come up with a policy or project under the themes of '**People**', '**Work**' and '**Place**', particularly to tackle climate change.

Back in February, pre-Covid-19, the lockdown in the UK was still a month away.

Under the theme of '**People**', two policy/project ideas emerged: district heating and reducing our dependence on polluting vehicles. Members were interested in how district heating initiatives could work sustainably in a rural context whilst having community building benefits and tackling fuel poverty. Could developers be required to provide district heating infrastructure in new housing developments? Discussion around polluting vehicles centred on electric vehicles (EVs), the need for infrastructure and suitability of locations for charging stations, e.g. town centres and community hubs.

Under '**Work**', rural digital connectivity featured as well as adding value to local resources by reducing the distances produce and materials have to travel. Particular challenges for rural communities were highlighted, e.g. poor broadband infrastructure, but on a positive note there was great potential for the creation of community hubs where organisations, businesses and individuals could work together. This could assist small businesses and home working in order to counter issues of isolation, but also reduce the need to travel.

Within the '**Place**' theme, infrastructure improvements to reduce travel and energy efficiency through community district heating were suggested. Towns and city design should actively promote pedestrian and other forms of active travel, whilst considering how scale affects rural areas. The community angle of district heating was explored in regards to how it can become a community enabler. Such initiatives could not only reduce emissions, increase efficiency and lower household energy costs, but also create a reason for communities to work together for mutual benefit.

The overwhelming winner, once all votes had been cast, was the promotion of district heating initiatives. Through lively discussion it became clear that in order to effectively tackle climate change, society would need to change. The concern though is how can planning policy balance reducing the need to travel and encouraging working from home, with the need to create and sustain healthy communities? Or are we merely facilitating the atomisation of our society? If the individual's experience of the Covid-19 lockdown has taught us anything, it is that being part of a community is vitally important to our mental and physical health.