

Young Planners NPF4 Roundtable 1 – Inclusive Growth

6 August 2020

This event was organised as part of a wider engagement programme undertaken by RTPI Scotland and commissioned by the Scottish Government for the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). The four young planner roundtables aimed to engage planners in the first ten years of their career and enable them to provide new thinking and ideas for the new NPF.

Context

This session was based on inclusive growth and was ‘kick-started’ by Ross Martin to initiate creative thinking on the topic and challenge and expand the ideas from the young planners during the discussion. Craig McLaren provided an overview of important changes to the National Planning Framework format and content.

Kick-starter Introduction

- Ross started off by showing a picture of cheese grater, which also could be viewed as a nightclub. This initiated the discussion that planning is 30% policy, 30% politics and 30% perception.
- Scotland is in a period of massive economic change as well as how people interact with the world e.g. how people organise their week, where they live. Before lockdown, only 3% of people WFH. This was up to 83% peak-Covid and is now at 33% (11x increase). This has huge implications for everything as a planner e.g. housing, transport. And it also means there is potentially a shift in the themes we need to concentrate on for NPF4.
- Despite NPF4 always being seen as an agent of change, it is now being developed in a changing context which provides a unique opportunity for planners to drive significant change. How can we change policy frameworks to ensure our places feel like home but balance the economy and the environment?

Role of Planners

- The roles of planners and their distinctive identity should be highlighted more.
- Research conducted by one of the delegates showed that individuals in other professions seen planners as ‘cogent for making things happen’.
- Politics often get in the way of planning decisions made by officers. NPF4 should give processes more status so that this reduces politician’s chances of rejecting it. We could learn from the depoliticalisation of infrastructure in Australia as well as the NPF in Ireland, whereby the development plans give politicians no right to reject things.
- NPF4 needs to have a strong policy framework so that planners can make well-informed decisions but it also needs to be a human document – positive and forward thinking.



Housing

- How do we change the way we develop housing to incorporate behavioural changes people are displaying? People are engaging far more in the places and spaces around them due to Covid. We have to accommodate these changes and create resilient communities.
- There is a lack of a push for Scotland to meet housing targets. National housing targets should be set within the NPF4 so there is more clarity. Housing delivery should therefore be more plan-led. Local authorities could be held accountable for meeting the targets, using a test to ensure they do this successfully.
- For affordable housing, the infrastructure levy could be reduced and the government funds could be given to low land value areas. Areas of high deprivation could be targeted strategically to reduce regional inequality.
- There is an opportunity to bring land use planning and transport planning together to address areas of low economic activity i.e. shift resources to areas where it's most needed and point investment towards areas of deprivation.

20-minute neighbourhoods and 15-minute cities

- People want better access to space, improved safety and flexibility when it comes to the places they live in. This is not just for dense, city areas.
- NPF4 should aim to design 15-minute 'cities' within rural areas. Working from home means there will be a boost to rural repopulation and NPF4 needs to make sure there is the right type of facilities, e.g. housing, in the right type of places.
- Rural community hubs would ideally be mentioned/prioritised in NPF4 as well as making better connections between anchor towns.

Regeneration

- Connectivity of place needs to become a key component to infrastructure. Brownfield sites are prioritised for development but a lot of these sites are highly contaminated and have very little transport links. There is a lot of pressure from the community for developers to remediate land. Remediation is key for many communities in Scotland and therefore vacant and derelict land (VDL) should have incentivised development here instead of in peripheral areas. This would support developers to be able to make these more sustainable choices.
- Brownfield land is however not always suitable to develop in which case trees could be planted instead.
- NPF4 should reduce Section 75 contributions on brownfield sites. It takes a lot of money to remediate sites so this will help balance costs more. Having certainty on the cost of a site and knowing the investment from the public sector would provide more certainty for developers.
- A health check should be made in high deprivation areas in order to make suitable investment in the area and a strategy for improvement. This could include looking into aspects such as population, transport and connectivity, digital connectivity and the success of areas economically. Different interventions will have different benefits and different timescales.
- There has been a shift away from area based regeneration strategies but there is a need to identify the most in need areas and prioritise infrastructure and resources for them to be successful.

Economy

- NPF4 could introduce an inclusive growth diagnostic tool, which would measure success in more of a wellbeing way moving away from GDP. LDP's could have inclusive growth impact assessments to take this forward.
- NPF4 should use a cross government approach (corporate ownership) linked with a capital investment programme or a vision for place programme in order to fund the delivery.
- Within a plan-led system, the onus is on developers to deliver it successfully. This allows for no flexibility and puts pressure on developers. NPF4 needs to give confidence that it can deliver projects and policies, therefore it needs a strategic approach rather than a plan-led one to give that element of flexibility.
- Master plan consent areas could have a role in inclusive growth. They provide a simplified planning zone approach and are prepared with developers so they know what is required in that area. This means town centres can become more flexible with usage, utilising space for restaurants and leisure rather than only retail spaces that are no longer working. Scottish Planning Policy will create an underpinning qualitative framework so that NPF4 does not become a free for all.
- NPF4 should provide a stable and coherent long-term investment in infrastructure.

Town Centres

- The changes to use class in England are radical but do provide flexibility for land use change in town centres. This provides an example for Scotland to see the opportunities and challenges that come with this – i.e. NPF4 would aim to find a middle ground where specific sites are protected and prioritised for conservation but flexibility for different land use is available. Masterplan consent areas in town centres may provide this happy medium, starting with most deprived areas and altering the approach depending on the area.
- There should be a change from town centres to 'community centres' and 'community hubs', i.e. moving from centres of just retail to community functions.
- There is a deficit in the relationship between cities and the surrounding towns and yet so many of our personal living experiences are in towns and we travel into the city. NPF4 needs to look at how these different areas relate and the roles they play in the regional economy.

Big Ideas from roundtable:

- NPF4 should be a human document – positive and forward thinking.
- Housing delivery need to be plan-led in NPF4 with targets set for clarity.
- NPF4 should strive for 15-minute 'cities' within rural areas.
- NPF4 should provide incentives for development on VDL.
- NPF4 should focus on well-connected places and make national, regional and local priorities for regeneration.
- NPF4 could introduce an inclusive growth diagnostic tool.
- NPF4 should use an all-government approach linked with a capital investment programme.
- NPF4 should rename town centres as 'community centres' and allow flexibility for units to reflect this.