

NPF 4 Position Statement

Quality Development

Thursday 4th February 2021, 2 – 3.30pm, online.

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Background

RTPI Scotland has been commissioned by Scottish Government to arrange a series of roundtables to provide feedback on the NPF4 Position Statement. A cross-cutting section of built environment professions were invited to the event from across the country. For this report a group discussion was had around the following question:

“Would the proposals in the Position Statement enable the delivery of good quality development?”

Key thematic areas discussed were:

- General direction
- Skills & culture
- Design standards
- Delivery & collaboration
- Outcomes

General direction

There was a positive response generally from delegates regarding the Position Statement. It was applauded for its comprehensiveness and ambitiousness. There were some concerns raised that it may be hard to deliver such a broad array of intentions. There was clear recognition from the group that quality design is fundamental to addressing many of the outcomes set out and the NPF4 needs to reflect this. However some delegates challenged whether the scale of change set out is radical enough to address climate and biological emergencies and whether design should have been more at the fore of the document. Whilst recognising that the Position Statement is a high level document, it was acknowledged that difficulties will be encountered when drafting the more detailed policy wording in the NPF4. A refreshing of the ‘designing streets’ guidance was considered to be a great opportunity to address design quality issues alongside the NPF4. In terms of context there was a feeling that design has not been prioritised in recent years in the planning system. The need to consider quality design beyond pure aesthetics was discussed, with elements of landscaping such as green infrastructure being just as integral to the design of schemes. The need to consider quality design in a rural environment as well as urban context was discussed.

Skills, resourcing & culture

There was a considerable conversation over design skills, predominantly within planning authority departments but also in the private sector. It was generally agreed that both resources and skills have reduced over time and subsequently so have design skills although one delegate recognised an improvement in their planning authority in this area in recent years. Pressure of high caseloads for development management planners and the emphasis on the speed of processing planning applications and desire for development in areas has reduced their capacity to respond to poor quality proposals. Some delegates felt that design quality has not been prioritised culturally within built environment or politics. The importance of leadership in driving confidence in younger planners to discuss design was discussed, with place and design panels highlighted as an important way of upskilling junior officers. The need to include more design skills

within planning courses was recognised as important by many of the delegates. The need to improve the understanding of the general public and politicians over what constitutes good design and how issues such as density can influence access to services and address net-zero targets.

Design standards

There was a full and considered discussion over the need for stronger policies or more instructive regulation such as design codes or zoning style approach to masterplans and neighbourhoods. The success of 'designing streets' was covered, which delegates felt had had mixed success, with edge of settlement residential developments highlighted in particular as generally receiving less consideration in terms of design quality. Concerns were also raised that the new build housing sector is not offering a wide enough range of product types. The need to mandate the involvement of qualified design professionals in schemes was discussed, for examples necessitating the membership of professional bodies such as RIBA or the Landscape Institute. Lessons of how to do this can be taken from the heritage and conservation sector. [Building for a Healthy Life](#) was discussed as an example of good practice in setting out a design code. Broadening out of the 'Designing Streets' guidance to capture the concept of 20 minute neighbourhoods fuller was generally support by delegates. Some delegates challenged the desire for more prescriptiveness in design standards raising concerns that it could not align with a discretionary planning system, possibly stifling innovative design or becoming out-of-date quickly. There was also concerns that design codes would not be able to address the diversity of the built form in Scotland, asking for design policies which reflect and enhance existing built characters without being overly constrained by them. Some delegates felt that it would be better to address issues of design quality with improved training and skills as previously discussed.

The need to follow an enhanced process approach to design was discussed. The Building with Nature accreditation was commended for following process standards through checkpoints in the development delivery process, which was considered to have resulted in positive outcomes. The need to ensure that landscaping was thoroughly considered in the masterplanning process and not just concerning aesthetics was recognised, with some delegates concerned that landscaping design are frequently dealt with in reserved matters.

Delivery & Collaboration

To achieve quality local outcomes, delegates felt that strong design policy at a national level was not in itself enough. The factors influencing the successful implementation of policy initiative were discussed thoroughly. Lots of barriers to implementation were discussed including development viability, especially on sites requiring remediation, and areas such as procurement, professional indemnities insurance, infrastructure provision and rapidly changing technologies. Some delegates felt that quality design was not enough of a political or commercial imperative. A key part of this area of discussion was how to bring about stronger, more successful collaboration across public and private sectors. The need to support a more collaborative, less adversarial approach to placemaking between the private and public sector was widely supported by delegates, some highlighting the need for a culture change beyond any policy changes. This included encouraging more public interest led development, communicating the commercial and brand value of delivering quality design to the private sector better and supporting diversification of the housebuilding market through support to SME housebuilders on smaller sites. The need to ensure that reporters working for the Scottish Government's Planning and Environmental Appeals Division were upskilled in regards to design considerations was raised to give more confidence to development management planners to refuse schemes on design grounds. Operationalising a corporately led Place Principle was regarded by many delegates as an opportunity to support delivery of quality design. The need to consider how the Place Principle could be addressed in the decision making process and enforced was discussed. The Place



Principle was viewed as a means to better encourage partnership working in planning to deliver regeneration, especially through a more coordinated and proactive means of working with key agencies, enabling various funding pots to be pulled together. The need for an advanced role in infrastructure led masterplanning was raised. Masterplan Consent Areas were discussed as a means to incentivise quality development as well as grant loan funding. A more clear definition of the infrastructure first principle was encouraged by some delegates. The need for a lead-in time for the private sector to adjust to new policy was discussed, with a realistic timescales in place necessary. The need for NPF4 to demonstrate place leadership was stressed throughout the roundtable. This included the corporate buy-in of the NPF4, especially within local authorities but also across built environment professions and the wider general public. A key role was identified here for the Chief Planning Officers and the opportunity for Scottish Government to push the quality design agenda through shaping this role was noted through the associated guidance due to be published through the implementation of the Planning Act (Scotland) 2019. To encourage better buy-in from stakeholders the need for the NPF4 to be visual, accessible, purposeful and spatial was put forth.

Outcomes

The final theme of discussion was how outcomes of the development process could be measured and evaluated to capture considerations of design quality. The Place Standard Tool and Design Quality Audits were both suggested as a means to do so. However with such long cycles of plan preparation, consenting and construction build-outs some delegates were concerned that the timeframe to measure quality on the ground would be extensive. It was suggested by other delegates that the only way to change behaviours and ways of working was to measure performance differently. Shaping the new role for the Improvement Coordinator was mentioned as a means to better evaluate quality design as an outcome. The need to undertake design audits was discussed, including post occupancy surveys with residents although a resource would need to be identified for such work. The idea that an independent quality audit agency be set up was floated. Lastly the need for a well-resourced, up-skilled enforcement service was addressed to ensure that design quality is maintained during and after construction.